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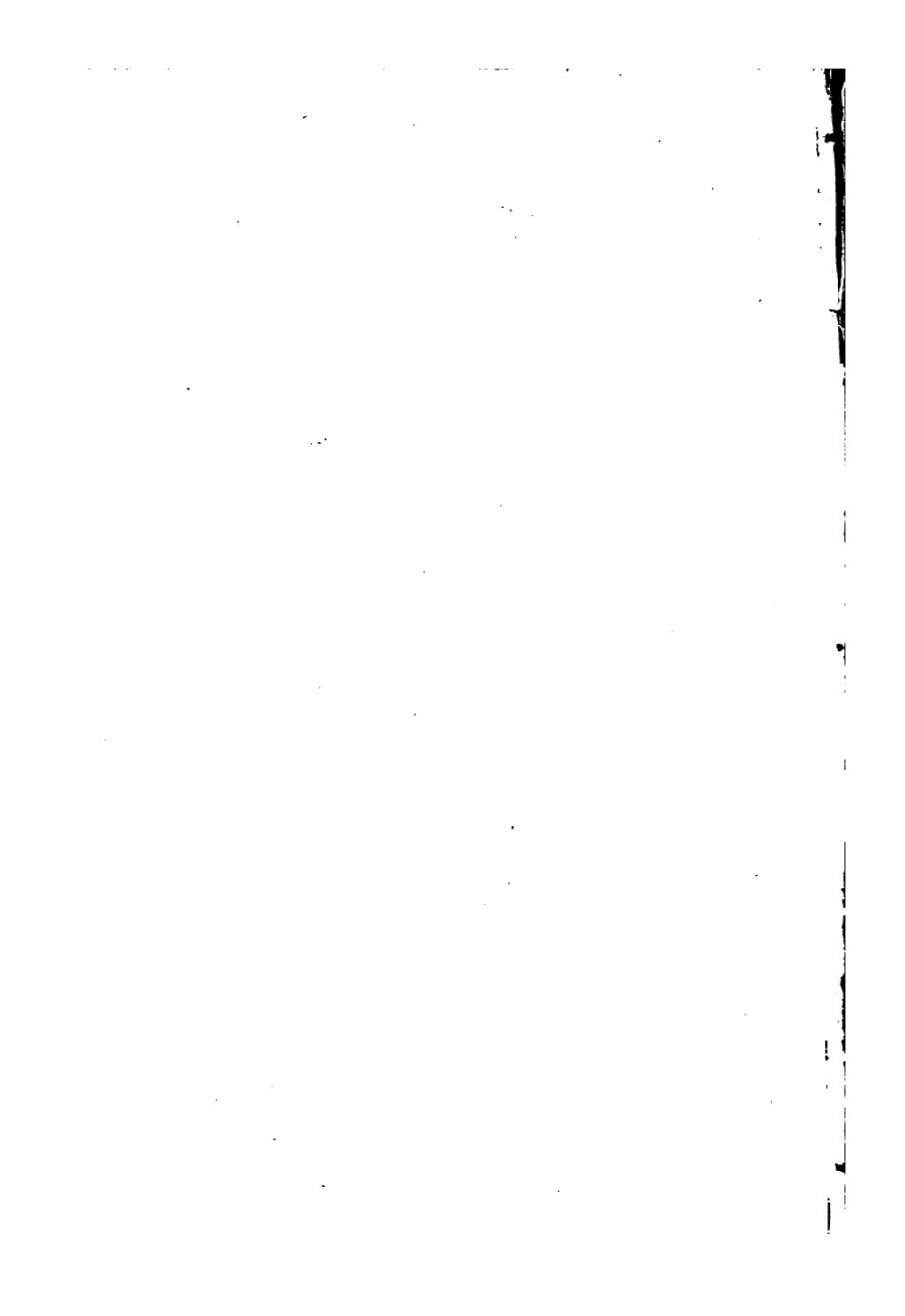
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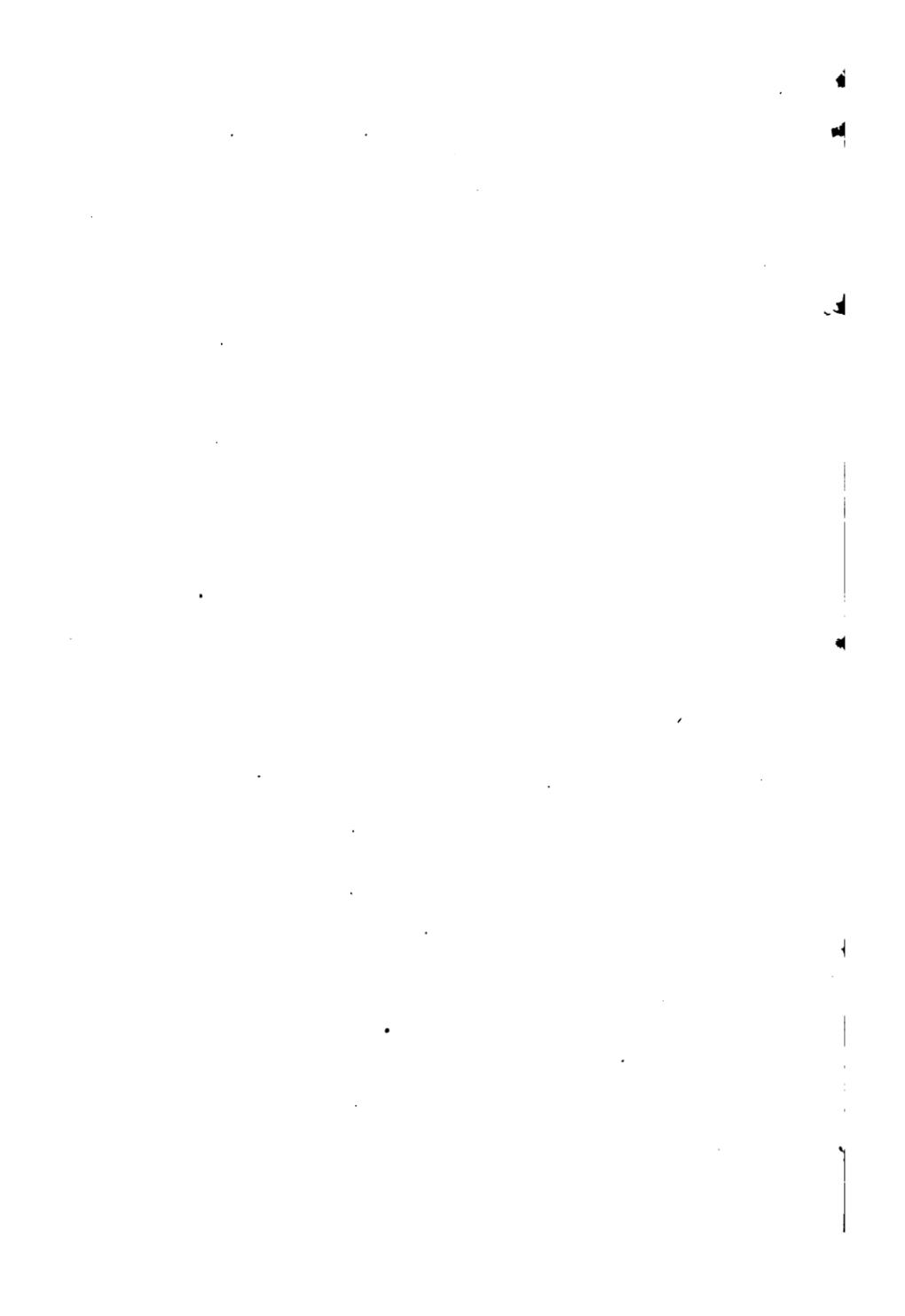
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THEODORA.







Theodora and her brother Alfred.—*Page 14.*

# THEODORA.

## A TALE FOR GIRLS.

BY

EMILIA MARRYAT NORRIS,

AUTHOR OF 'THE EARLY START IN LIFE,' 'LONG EVENINGS,'  
'STOLEN CHERRIES,' ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY GEORGE HAY.



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# THEODORA.

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## CHAPTER I.

Theodora one of a large family—Her father's illness.

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THEODORA ASTLEY was the eldest of a large family. Below her in age were four boys and four girls; so that, from her earliest remembrance, she had been a responsible person at home. She was of most importance to her father, whose companion she was, in many ways that a girl does not usually have an opportunity of being.

At the time I speak of her, she was sixteen years old, but she imagined she felt a great deal older; and, indeed, although in appearance she was childish, many, in hearing her speak, would have thought her quite a young woman.

Now, I daresay you are ready to say that you consider a girl of sixteen quite a young woman. So did I, when I was that age; and, as you may do, I thought myself more experienced and a great deal cleverer than I do now.

It was not likely that Theodora Astley could know much of the world, considering that she had scarcely ever been beyond the village in which she had been born, and of which her father was the clergyman ; but she knew more of other things than most girls of her age, from having been so used to talking with her father. All she knew she had learnt from him and from books ; and, perhaps, other knowledge she was as well without. One misfortune in the life of Theodora was, that she had been almost the only young lady in the village in which she lived, so that she had learned to think too much of her own importance—as if, indeed, the little trumpery village of Chatterton had been the world !

For some years past the health of Mr. Astley had been failing ; but, as he made no complaint, and went on with his work much as usual, and as all those who loved him wished to believe there was nothing really amiss with him, they did believe it, until they were all taken by surprise by his suddenly breaking down, and showing to all how much worse he had been for a long time than any one had supposed.

Then there was utter consternation and grief in the house. Mrs. Astley wept and wrung her hands in despair ; the boys, who were all at home for the holidays, added to the confusion, and did nothing in the way of help ; the younger girls alternately clung to their mother, and by their sobs increased her want of self-control ; and, in all the house, no one but Theodora was capable of any exertion.

It was necessary to keep the house quiet ; but Theodora's

help was wanted in her father's room, and, without his or her influence, there was nothing but uproar.

The doctor, who had known every one of the Astleys from their birth, led Theodora into a room apart, and said to her—

‘Things cannot go on in this way, my dear ; the house must be cleared of some of the children. I will take the two elder boys home with me ; think of some one to relieve you of the little ones.’

‘Farmer Hailes’ wife would take them at once, I am sure, if I asked her,’ said Theodora.

‘That is Georgy, Alice, and the baby,’ said Mr. Morgan.

‘Oh ! mamma never would let baby go,’ Theodora answered.

‘She must let him go ; he is more plague than all the rest together. Why, I found him this morning kicking with all his might at your poor father’s door. I insist upon his going. Theo, you are the only sensible one of the family ; you must make your mother see the necessity of keeping the house quiet.’

‘Do you think that papa—’ asked Theodora, wistfully looking up at the doctor.

‘Your father is very ill, Theo, very ill indeed ; he has neglected himself terribly.’

‘You think he will die, Mr. Morgan ?’ asked Theodora, her lip trembling ; but at the same time she stedfastly looked at her friend. ‘Ah ! I see you do,’ she added, as the doctor hesitated in what way to answer her.

‘Theodora, my dear girl,’ said Mr. Morgan, ‘I can

trust you in this matter. Your poor father himself knows that he will die. You know well what is your duty in the matter. Anybody can sit down and cry, Theo; but I hope better things of you. And now I will go and look up Alfred and Bob, and take them home with me.'

Mr. Morgan left the room without any further words, leaving Theodora standing in the same position she had been in throughout their interview, with her hand leaning upon her father's writing-table. She could only think of one sentence—her father was dying!

A moment afterwards the doctor returned, and, opening the door, said—

‘By-the-bye, my dear, don't trouble yourself about Mrs. Hailes and the little ones; I'll manage that.’

And Theo said mechanically ‘Thank you,’ and Mr. Morgan was again gone.

‘Her father was dying!’ Theodora loved her father very much. She had been always his friend. There was no one she loved like her father—no one in this world, or *in the world to come*. That was the mischief of it. All that Theodora had learnt of God had not made her love God really, although she imagined that she did, because she knew that it was her duty to do so. She felt as if she would like to put her hands upon her temples, and scream aloud, ‘I cannot bear it; it is too hard!’ but the words of Mr. Morgan recurred to her—‘Theo, you are the only sensible one in the house. I can trust you in this matter. Anybody can sit down and cry; but I hope better things of you.’

Even in the midst of her almost stunning grief, she felt a pleasure that she should be esteemed sensible, and above the ordinary weaknesses of women.

‘I must not sit here, or I shall be obliged to cry,’ said she, and she moved to the door.

There was such a new feeling in her mind, that the very passage and staircase looked strange to her as she passed towards her father’s bedroom. Georgy ran after her and begged to come with her.

‘It is so dull, Theo, without you,’ he said. ‘Brothers won’t read to me, and they tease me so, and Ally is so cross !’

‘I ain’t,’ squeaked out Alice from the stairs above, where she had been overhearing what her little brother said. ‘You’re cross yourself, you nasty boy ! and I’ll tell papa of you, I will. I’ll go this very minute and tell him, you’ story you !’

Alice was going to put her threat in execution, by rushing to her father’s room, when Theodora stopped her.

‘If you are both very good children, and don’t quarrel, you shall both of you go to Mrs. Hailes’, and stop to tea, and I don’t know how long. There’s fun !’

Then began a noise of rejoicing in place of that of dispute, so that it was some time before Theodora could persuade the little ones to be quiet. She tried to find her sister Gertrude, who was next in age to herself, and fourteen years old, that she might get her to go out in the garden with the children ; but Gertrude was selfish, and was nowhere to be found. Theodora asked little Edith if

she thought she could take care of them all ; and Edith of course thought she could ; but the whole party were hardly out of sight, and Theodora's hand had but just opened her father's door, when there was a scream of mixed rage and despair, and she had to run down-stairs to see what was the matter. Edith, in her new importance as nursemaid, had insisted upon carrying the baby, a great fat boy of three, and the two together had tumbled down-stairs, and now both lay roaring at the bottom.

'Don't worry yourself, miss,' said Mary Anne, the housemaid, running down from the top of the house. 'I'll take the children into the garden, and keep them quiet.'

'But your work, Mary Anne ?'

'Never mind, miss ; I'll find the time later ; my work must wait. If it wasn't for that bell, I wouldn't mind nothing.'

For, at the moment, the door-bell rang again—as it did about every ten minutes—obliging Mary Anne to leave whatever she was doing, in order to answer the multifarious polite inquiries, and appeals from the poor, thus adding very considerably indeed to her work.

'Here, cook, do 'ee mind the bell, whiles I go out with the children,' called Mary Anne over the kitchen stairs ; and, this point being settled, Theodora returned to the door of her father's bedroom.



## CHAPTER II.

Mr. Astley's last words to Theodora—The meaning of her name—The sudden ending—The crisis of Theodora's life.



H, my child, you have come at last!' said Mr. Astley wearily, as Theodora entered his room. 'I have been longing so for you, dear.'

'The children, dear papa—' commenced Theodora. But he interrupted her: 'I know, I know you could not come before. I know you have to attend to everything, my dear, or the house would not hold together.'

Theodora said nothing. Here was another, and this time the person she loved and revered best in the world, helping her to be self-sufficient. So she sat, holding her father's hand in hers, and thinking of all the doctor had said. It was still so strange, this secret of which she alone was possessed, that she could only think of it as so many words; there was no reality in it. Her mother was reclining half asleep in a chair, and every now and then Mr. Astley glanced towards her; and as he did so,

Theodora could not help observing the look of pity in his face.

‘My dear,’ said he, after a while, ‘I wish you would go into the air for a little time, now that Theo is here ; she can do all I wish for me, you look so tired.’

‘I think I had best perhaps go and see after baby,’ said Mrs. Astley, ‘he seems to be crying a great deal ;’ and she left the room.

No sooner was she gone than Mr. Astley said—

‘Theo, my child, I want to speak to you quietly. Perhaps you may have guessed before now that I am seriously ill. I see you know it,’ as her eyes met his. ‘I have known it for a long while past. You are very young, my dear little girl, to be left in the position in which you will be ; but you are more thoughtful than many girls of your age. Your dear mother, as you know, is not strong, and incapable of much exertion. I look to you chiefly, Theo.’ He stopped, for she gave a sob ; then he went on, ‘I could wish you had been born a boy for your own sake, my child. I must speak of this to you, although it wrings my heart to pain you so. Theodora, remember the meaning of your name ! Be *God’s gift* to those who will look up to you.’

By this time she was on her knees by his bedside, sobbing violently ; but it was only for a few minutes.

‘Forgive me, dear papa ! darling papa !’ she said ; ‘I did try not to do it ; but I should have choked if I had not cried. I will not cry any more ; I am so sorry. I promise I will cry no more ; but, papa, I love you so.’

‘I know you do, my child, and it is because you love me that you will remember my last words to you. It will not be long before you will have to put them in practice, for I do not think I shall live many days more, Theo. You will not forget the lessons I have tried to teach you, Theo ; I am too weak to repeat them now.’

Theodora knew well to what lessons her father alluded, and she answered ‘Yes ;’ but further words on the part of either were put a stop to by an uproar below stairs, and Mr. Astley begged her to go and inquire the cause.

‘No, I will not consent to it, I will not hear of it,’ were the words which reached her as she ran down the staircase to the dining-room.

‘Theodora,’ said her mother to her as she entered, ‘what business had you to consent to baby being taken to Mrs. Hailes ? Is it likely that I should allow baby to go ? I consider your conduct very impertinent.’

‘Mr. Morgan thought that all the children had better go for a time, mamma,’ Theodora answered. ‘He says that the house *must* be kept quiet.’

‘Absurd,’ said Mrs. Astley ; ‘your father’s illness is not one likely to be increased by any noise the children might make. It is not as if it was fever, or anything dangerous.’

‘Papa is very ill,’ said Theodora.

‘What do you mean ?’ asked her mother. ‘What do you know about it ? Who has said anything to you ? It is not likely that you should know better than I do, Theodora. What do you mean by upsetting me in this way, as if I had not trouble enough already ?’

‘I think, mamma, that you would be saved a great deal of trouble, if you would let baby go with the other children. You have plenty to do without looking after him.’

‘I shall not let him go. I don’t see what excuse you and Mr. Morgan have for settling such sort of things behind my back, without reference to me.’

‘There was nothing settled,’ said Theodora. ‘It was only proposed; and I agreed with Mr. Morgan that it would be a good thing.’

‘You take a great deal too much upon yourself, Theodora,’ said Mrs. Astley in a displeased tone. So the baby, so-called, remained at home to tyrannize over the household; and Theodora began debating in her own mind whether she had best tell her mother of her father’s danger. Mr. Morgan had said nothing about it, and neither had her father; so she waited in hopes of another opportunity of speaking to him alone, before she should acquaint her mother with a fact which, she knew, would elicit from her such uncontrolled grief as would, without doubt, agitate the dying man also. But that opportunity never came. Mr. Astley was nearer death than Mr. Morgan or he himself thought. Less than four-and-twenty hours after Theodora’s interview with her father, before she had hardly become accustomed to the idea that he must leave her, the reality came,—so suddenly, there was but time to call her mother, who was, of course, engaged in quieting the baby, and to send a messenger for the doctor, when the last hurried breath subsided into

a sigh, and Mr. Astley lay dead. Then his wife gave one piercing scream, and fell to the floor; and it was some minutes before she could be restored. As she opened her eyes, they rested upon Theodora. 'You knew of his danger,' she said, 'you must have known! It was cruel, heartless, to let me be so taken by surprise.'

'Dear mamma, I hardly knew what to do, I was so afraid of agitating you. I did not think it would be so soon. I wish I had told you,' said Theodora. 'It must have been a fearful shock.'

'A fearful shock!' echoed Mrs. Astley, bursting into tears. 'How little you can understand the feelings of a warm-hearted person! You never had much feeling, Theodora. You have nearly killed your mother by your want of thought.'

It was Mrs. Astley's idea, and had been always, that Theodora was not a girl of strong affection. She had never been able to understand the self-control which was natural to her daughter, and which she had not been able to acquire herself; and there had always been a certain degree of jealousy in the mind of Mrs. Astley at Theodora's evident partiality for her father. She imagined that Theodora had not much love for herself; and now, when all the girl's sympathy was alive on behalf of her mother in her bereavement and distress, and made warmer by Mrs. Astley's helplessness, which appealed to Theodora's stronger character, it did seem hard that all her mother's affection seemed to be lavished upon the younger children, and Theodora was almost left alone.

It was the crisis of her life, though. There is such a crisis in the life of each of us, whether we take advantage of it for our good, or whether we allow it to take advantage of us for harm. But what that crisis brought to Theodora I must leave for another chapter.





### CHAPTER III.

Loneliness — Theodora's mistake — Her brother's love for her — Alfred's regrets — The brother and sister become friends — Alfred shows himself in his true colours.

**S**HE felt very lonely, as at length, after all the tumult of feeling of that day, she sat in her bedroom. As she parted with her mother, Theodora had asked permission to remain with her during the night, saying, that she thought she had better not be alone. But Mrs. Astley declined any such help from her daughter.

'I don't believe mamma loves me much,' thought poor Theodora, as she sat with her hands upon her lap. She had no inclination to go to bed. She felt as if she could never sleep again. 'No one ever really loved me excepting papa. He was my only friend, and he is gone! It is very cruel; my only friend gone; I am quite alone now.'

She kept on repeating this kind of thing to herself, until she felt as if she could not any longer remain there by herself; so she wandered down-stairs to her sister's room. It was a bright moonlight night, and sufficiently

light to see Gertrude and Edith sleeping quietly together, and Georgy in a little bed in the same room.

‘How odd that Gertrude should sleep, and papa dead!’ thought Theodora. She heard talking as she passed the boys’ room ; they were not yet asleep ; then she heard the baby. ‘He is keeping mamma awake,’ thought Theodora, and she passed on her way. It was to the room where her father lay that she was going, and she reached it without noise, and turning the key in the door, went in. She felt as if she should be less lonely and less miserable here than elsewhere. There was a long glass at one end of the room ; and as Theodora entered, she caught sight of the reflection of herself in the mirror. She looked very slight and small, and as white as a sheet in the moonlight ; and this, when she had held out so long, upset her ; even to herself she looked such a poor little miserable thing, that she burst into tears.

‘Oh, papa ! papa ! why did you leave me ? No one but you cares for me—no one, no one ! I am quite alone. I wish I had died with you.’

Theodora did not know that some one had followed her very shortly. Her brothers had heard her pass their room, and had wondered who it could be wandering about the house at that time of night. Alfred, the elder, had started from his bed ; but Bob, who was not renowned for his courage, felt half afraid, and would not stir. As soon as Alfred opened his room door, he caught sight of Theodora, and saw where she was going ; but he said nothing to his brother, he only closed the door

quietly and followed her, and as she called out in that pitiful tone of voice, he stretched out his arms and caught her hands in his.

‘What do you mean, Theo?’ he asked. ‘Don’t I care for you?’

‘You?’ said Theodora, startled at seeing him so suddenly, standing in his night-shirt, and looking as ghastly white almost as herself. ‘You, Alf! do you care for me?’

‘Now, Theo,’ said Alfred, ‘do you mean really to say you think, because I have teased and bullied you, and been rough, and all that sort of thing, that I don’t love you? Why do you come here all alone in the night, and say such dreadful things? Here, look at me, Theo; don’t you think I love you? Why, I am your brother, you know; and perhaps you won’t believe it, Theo, but I loved my father there very much.’

‘Did you? I am sure you did, Alf; and I know I love you,’ said Theodora, hugging him.

‘Well, if you love me, who am not much of a fellow at best, isn’t it natural that I should love you, Theo, who always have been such a brick of a sister to me, eh?’ asked Alfred. Then the boy looked right and left, to make sure that no one else was witnessing, and threw himself upon his sister’s neck and cried. ‘I tell you what,’ said he, when his tears came to an end, ‘I feel so horrid and miserable, I can’t tell you. When I look at poor father there—I never treated him as I ought. I used to be so careless of what he said; and even at the last I made such a noise that I had to be turned out of the

house ; but I hadn't the least idea that he would die. If I had had, I would sooner have cut my head off. But there, it's of no use talking now ; only, whatever you do, Theo, don't think I don't love you.'

Theodora had before this, with her usual thoughtfulness, wrapped a shawl round Alfred, whose teeth were chattering either from the cold or the excitement of feeling.

' You had better go back to bed, dear,' said she.

' Will you if I do ? ' he asked.

' I could not sleep,' said Theodora.

' Well, I will go and put on my things, and come back and sit with you. You must not sit here alone. You will imagine somebody else does not love you if you do.' Theodora sighed ; for she remembered who had been in her thoughts when she had bewailed her loneliness. It was a comfort to have Alfred with her, and she felt happy compared to what she had felt before he came. He was presently back again, and the two sat down together. Theodora could not help thinking how quickly Alfred seemed to have changed from a child into something almost manly. She said to him in a little while—

' You have made me so much happier, Alf ; it is so wretched to feel quite alone ! '

Alfred was silent for a minute, and then he said—

' Of course, Theo ; but, do you know, it seems hardly right to say that you wish you had died, even if you were lonely in the world ? '

' I should wish it now, but for you,' said Theodora.

‘Then I think you are wrong ; and I believe father would think so too. There is always God, Theo.’

This seemed a strange thing to come from Alfred, who had appeared no more than a boy, thinking of nothing better than play.

‘Always God !’ repeated Theodora.

‘Yes. I don’t think I should ever feel quite lonely, if everybody in the world I love were to die, because God is a better Friend than any other.’

‘How good you are, Alf !’ said Theodora.

‘Theo, whatever you do, don’t talk such humbug as that,’ said Alfred, in his blunt way ; ‘I only said what I know to be true. It is somewhere in the Bible, “There is a Friend that sticketh closer than a brother,” and I know that means Jesus Christ. There,’ he concluded, ‘I have said more to you than I ever said to any one ; and I don’t believe I could have said so much, excepting that it is too dark here to see each other’s faces.’

‘You have done me so much good,’ said Theodora, in a low voice.

It was true. The words her brother had spoken to her had taken more effect than all the lessons of her life. Both were silent ; but in Theodora’s heart was perpetually ringing the sentence from the Bible which Alfred had repeated.

That was the crisis in Theodora’s life of which I spoke. All things were changed to her from that night, when she watched with Alfred by her father’s body. Her new life had begun. She had a stronger motive of action than

any mere sense of duty could give her. She had been always an amiable girl ; now she became a devoted one.

When morning came, some surprise was felt that neither Theodora nor Alfred were found in their respective rooms ; and greater still when they were both discovered asleep, with their heads fallen against the bed, whereon the coffin rested.

Mary Anne was horrified. Although she had felt a regard for her master during his lifetime, and had wept abundantly at his death, she had been afraid, ever since that event, of being left alone for five minutes, and could hardly be persuaded, even in company, to pass the room where his body lay.

Perhaps it may seem strange to some of you when I say, that, happy and careless as Theodora's life had been until her father's death, and deeply as now she felt her loss, never had she felt so really happy and at rest as she did after finding the truth of Alfred's words.

Mrs. Astley was surprised at the sudden change in her daughter. The child, whom she had imagined unaffectionate, seemed to have forgotten herself in her efforts to serve others. I have said that Mrs. Astley's was a character which required always to lean upon some stronger will than her own ; or, if I have not said it, I have implied it. Thenceforth she rested upon Theodora, and the self-sufficiency of the latter seemed again in danger of being nursed and encouraged, instead of opposed.



## CHAPTER IV.

Plans for the future—‘A thorough-going gentleman’—Theodora’s proposal—Her interview with Mr. Morgan—Alfred’s way of making money.

**A**DAY or two after the funeral the whole family sat together in the drawing-room talking of their prospects. The conversation had been brought about by a remark of Mr. Morgan’s. As soon as the doctor had left the house, Mrs. Astley said—

‘It is all very well for Mr. Morgan to say “What do you propose doing?” I do not see that there is anything to be done. We shall have enough to eat and drink, and I suppose we must be content with that. I am not capable of working, as you know, to increase our income.’

‘But some of us may, mamma,’ said Theodora; ‘I do not see why we should all live upon you. But I think Mr. Morgan’s question was meant more with regard to the boys.’

‘Of course I cannot continue to keep your brothers at the same school they were at whilst your poor father

lived, Theodora. I really do not know what is to be done about them. It is not of so much consequence with girls. I am afraid the loss will come very heavily in every way upon my poor boys.'

'Oh, never mind, mother,' said Alfred, cheerfully; 'I have no doubt I shall be able to get some work. I'll try at once. I'll run errands, or turn shop-boy, sooner than I'll sponge upon you.'

Mrs. Astley and Theodora knew how, since his earliest childhood, Alfred's heart had been set upon going to sea, and the latter especially was touched with his quick, unselfish forgetfulness of his own plans.

'Is there no way of getting Alf into the navy?' said Theodora.

'It is the Naval College which we could never manage,' said Mrs. Astley. 'My income, at the utmost, will be two hundred a year. I would willingly and gladly live upon a hundred and fifty, and so make Alfred an allowance whilst he requires it, if he were once in the navy; but I could not put him to the Naval School first. Ah! if only your poor dear father had been spared to us a few years longer!' sobbed poor Mrs. Astley. 'He always counted on the friendship of Lord Barrington.'

'Where is Lord Barrington now?' asked Theodora.

'I suppose he is in town, my dear; he is the Duke of X—— now, and has been for some years.'

'Oh! I remember; he has something to do with the Admiralty,' said Theodora.

'He has every influence; he could have done anything

for Alfred, and would, I have no doubt, had your dear father lived.'

'And would he not still?' asked Theodora.

'Is it likely, my dear? I know nothing of him; I never saw him, that I know, in my life. Besides, even had he the inclination, there is the insuperable obstacle of our being unable to send Alfred to a Naval School.'

'Don't worry yourself, mother,' said Alfred; 'it can't be done. I shall be superannuated if I don't go at once; and so I shall look out for a nice little shop, where an advertisement is in the window with "errand-boy wanted;" and perhaps, after all, I may find I like that employment best.'

'Gentlemen are not errand-boys, are they, mamma?' asked little Edith.

'No, my dear; Alfred is joking.'

'Upon my honour, mother, I am not,' said Alfred. 'Of course, I will try for something higher first; but if I can't get it without delay, I'll turn errand-boy, or crossing-sweeper, or whatever I can to get an honest living, sooner than I'll burden you, mother. To my mind, the most *ungentlemanly* thing I could possibly do would be to add to your difficulties.'

Mrs. Astley threw her arms round her boy and kissed him. His eyes were full of tears, partly from emotion, and partly because it was so very hard to give up the navy.

'You are a thorough-going gentleman, Alf,' said Theodora, 'whether you become a crossing-sweeper or a post-captain.'

She said no more at the time, for, just as she spoke, Mr. Morgan returned.

'I only came to say that I am going to town to-morrow, Mrs. Astley,' said the doctor; 'and I want to ask if there is anything I can do for you.'

'Nothing, thank you; you are very kind,' said the widow; and in another moment he was gone.

'Alf, dear, come and walk in the garden with me,' said Theodora; 'I want to have a talk with you. It is all very well,' said she when they were alone, 'for you to say you will turn errand-boy, but, seriously, it won't do. You must do something, but it must be something fit for a gentleman.'

'What!' said Alfred, almost savagely, 'do you think I like being turned into a cad? Do you think I like giving up going to sea? If you do, you are very much mistaken.' And Alfred burst into passionate tears.

'It is that I want to speak to you about,' said Theodora; 'only you must promise not to say anything about it.'

'All right, I promise,' said Alfred, without a moment's thought.

'I shall go to London, and see this Duke of X——.'

'Theo, are you cracked?' said Alfred, with more vehemence than politeness. 'How can you go to London? And what would be the use if you could?'

'At least I will try. But, as you say, first, how am I to go to London? You heard Mr. Morgan say to-day that he is going to-morrow morning. I was thinking of going before he came; but when he said that, I was de-

terminated. The only thing is the money. It costs, I know, twenty-six shillings to get to town, and I have only seven and sixpence.'

'Well, I have half a sovereign,' said Alfred ; 'of course you must take that.'

'That is not enough,' said Theodora, sadly.

'You know, Theo, that it is first-class costs twenty-six shillings ; second-class would not be so much.'

'But could I travel second-class ?'

'People do,' said Alfred.

'Well, it matters very little ; I'll travel second-class,' said Theodora ; and, in her ignorance, she thought she made a greater concession of her dignity in this particular than in anything else she had done or was ready to do.

After a time, Alfred said—

'But why must not I tell ?'

'Because mamma might dislike the idea of my going. She would think me too young ; but I am quite old enough to take care of myself,' said Theodora.

'Mr. Morgan would take care of you.'

'By-the-bye, I must go and speak to him about it,' said Theodora ; and without further preparation she ran from the garden to the doctor's house, with only her garden hat on.

Mr. Morgan was surprised at seeing her under existing circumstances, accustomed as he was to these uncemonious visits from his neighbours, and more surprised to hear Theodora, without any preface, ask—

'What is the second-class fare to London ?'

‘Twenty shillings, Theo. Why do you ask, my dear? who is going to London?’

‘I am,’ she answered; ‘but I have not enough, I have only seventeen shillings. What shall I do?’

‘What are you going to town for, may I ask?’ said Mr. Morgan.

‘Why, I must go about Alfred.’

‘Here, sit down and tell me all about it,’ said Mr. Morgan. Theodora did so. ‘My dear little girl,’ said he, at the conclusion of her speech, ‘this is a very wild goose idea on your part. Even if you could see the Duke of X—, it is not in the least likely that he can do or will do anything for your brother.’

‘I will try at any rate,’ said Theodora determinedly.

‘I shall not help you, Theodora,’ said Mr. Morgan gravely. ‘I shall not lend you any money for paying your fare; nor shall I allow you to go with me.’

‘I don’t want you to lend me money to pay my fare. I don’t ask you to help me in any way. You are very unkind. I took you for my friend; but I see my mistake,’ said Theodora, springing to her feet.

‘Come, come, little tragedy queen,’ said Mr. Morgan, ‘don’t talk nonsense. Go home and think it over, and you will see the absurdity of the whole thing.’

The tears of disappointment and anger were standing in Theodora’s eyes. She turned away, and would not see the hand of Mr. Morgan which was stretched out to her; and, without looking at him again, she ran from the house.

'If I could only tell mamma what I want to do, I would care for nothing. I will write her a letter, and then she will see it is all right. I am sure I am doing right, only mamma might be nervous.'

She wrote the letter on the instant, and confided it to Alfred; but there was still the difficulty of the money. Suddenly Alfred remembered that, some time before, one of his boy friends had wished to buy of him some of his rabbits. At the time he had refused to part with them; but now money was the great necessity, and he proceeded at once to try and make a bargain. He was successful, and returned with three and sixpence, for which he had parted with his three best rabbits; but he and Theodora were both greatly delighted, and looked upon their scheme as very promising.

It was really Theodora's greatest trial in this matter that she thought it necessary to conceal it from her mother, as concealment always is to every candid girl or boy; but by this time she had worked herself up into a strong feeling that it was her duty to undertake this mission on behalf of Alfred, and a confidence, encouraged by Alfred himself, that the mission would be successful.



## CHAPTER V.

Theodora starts on her expedition to London—Her meeting with Mr. Morgan—Her vague ideas of London—Mr. Morgan undertakes to help her.

**B**EFORE the earliest train on the following morning, Theodora was at the railway station. She did not know by which train Mr. Morgan was going to town; but as she preferred, for safety's sake, going with him, as if his presence, although not in the same carriage as herself, could be a protection, and as she did not see him upon the platform at that early hour, she remained in the waiting-room for what seemed to her an interminable time, until the next train was due.

Then, looking from the waiting-room window, Theodora saw Mr. Morgan enter a second-class carriage; and when he was engrossed in a newspaper, she, with averted head, climbed into the adjoining compartment of the same. She had no fixed plan of action. Her only idea was to get to London. Theodora was rather a clever girl; but, curiously enough, it had not occurred to her, that even though she might manage to arrive in London, she had

no means of getting home again. All this flashed upon her mind at once as the engine shrieked, and the train was fairly in motion. What was she to do when she was in town? How was she to find the Duke of X——? How was she to return?

Then the folly of what she had done struck her in its real light, and she would have given much to be safe at home again. But it was too late. She turned so pale, that her fellow-passengers looked at her curiously.

The first station was passed, and Theodora felt as if she could have thrown herself from the carriage in her consternation and almost despair. She sat perfectly still, and another station seemed to go by, and at length the train stopped.

‘If I could only go back!’ thought Theodora, leaning from the carriage window, and gazing on the platform, where people were hurrying to and fro.

She heard her own name exclaimed in a familiar voice; and at the same moment she saw the face of Mr. Morgan before her.

‘Theodora!’ said he; ‘is it possible that you have come after all?’

Theodora tried to smile, but she could not; she tried to answer him, but she burst into tears; and Mr. Morgan calling to a guard to unlock the carriage, handed her out.

‘I am very much surprised, and very angry with you, Theodora,’ he said. ‘You must return home at once.’

But Theodora’s courage had returned with the sight of Mr. Morgan’s well-known face, and she answered—

‘I cannot now ; I have paid all my money but a shilling for my ticket. I must go on ; besides, I promised Alfred I would try for him, and I must keep my word.’

‘And your mother?’

‘I wrote a letter to mamma before I left. She will understand it all. Besides, it will not be the same to her as if it was one of the others,’ said Theodora.

‘You are an obstinate little mule,’ said Mr. Morgan. ‘Of course I can get you a ticket home again.’

Theodora shook her head.

‘At any rate, we must do one thing or the other—the train won’t wait for us. If you won’t go home, I suppose you won’t. I shall telegraph to Mrs. Astley when we get to town.’

He put Theodora into a carriage as the train was beginning to move, and followed her ; and for some time he sat opposite to her without speaking a word. He was evidently annoyed and puzzled, and hardly knew what to do. But, after a long silence, Mr. Morgan placed his hands upon his knees, and bent forward.

‘Theodora,’ said he, ‘you have undertaken a most Quixotic and absurd errand ; but as it is undertaken, and you are bent upon making yourself ridiculous, my only duty is to see that you do not make yourself more ridiculous than necessary, and to take care of you so far as I can.’

‘How kind you are !’ said Theodora.

‘Hold your tongue, Theo, and listen to me. I am very much displeased with you,’ said Mr. Morgan.

‘No, you are not,’ said she, smiling; ‘or you would not have called me “Theo.”’

Mr. Morgan made no answer to this remark, but said—

‘Now, what do you intend doing when you get to London?’

‘I must call upon the Duke of X——.’

‘And where does he live?’

‘Oh, I found out that of course,’ said Theodora. ‘In Eaton Square.’

‘And how far do you imagine Eaton Square is from the Waterloo Station, where we shall stop? And how do you imagine you will find your way?’

Theodora looked at him in silence for a moment, then she said—

‘I do not know how far it is; but why should I not find my way? I intend to.’

‘Well, Theo, you deserve to succeed, and I hope with all my heart you will; but your going about London by yourself on foot is simply impossible, and your proposal shows what a little country bumpkin you are. I must, I suppose, give up the time to see you safely through this ridiculous scheme; so I shall take you to the Duke of X——’s house, and make sure that you are not kidnapped on the road; and I hope that your present difficulty will be a lesson to you for the future, not to undertake any such absurdity again.’

As it seemed to Theodora that she was in a fair way of overcoming her greatest difficulties,—for, with regard to the Duke of X——, she imagined that she had but

to see him in order to obtain what she wanted,—she made no answer to her friend's speech.

Now, although I tell you these incidents in the life of Theodora Astley, I do not mean to hold her up to you as an example in her rashness. She was in this matter impulsive, and very little guided by judgment. At the same time, in her great energy and unselfishness, she is an example. If Theodora succeeds in her efforts to serve her brother, against the expectation of those wiser than herself, it would be a success which might happen once in a hundred years, and not even to one in a hundred people.

Theodora was not a commonplace girl ; and as we more generally make circumstances than circumstances make us—that is, unless we are mere nonentities—so things happened to her unlike what they might to many others ; and if she were to succeed in her interview with the Duke of X—, which, I agree with Mr. Morgan, was a very Quixotic scheme to any but to Theodora, it would be, I believe, in a great measure through her firm determination not to fail.





## CHAPTER VI.

Alfred is placed in an uncomfortable position—Theodora arrives in London, and calls upon the Duke of X—.

**T**HEODORA was missed shortly after she left home. There was a great deal of calling after her, and a great deal of surprise evinced at her disappearance; so much so, that Alfred's heart smote him for having connived at her scheme, and it was with a very uncomfortable feeling that he delivered to his mother the letter which Theodora had left in his charge.

Mrs. Astley was very angry with Alfred, and I think she was rightly so. He ought never to have sanctioned his sister's going to town. Mrs. Astley did not blame Theodora; she saw all the unselfishness of her conduct, and any annoyance she might have felt was absorbed in anxiety for her safety.

Alfred's assurance that Mr. Morgan had gone with Theodora was contradicted very shortly after he had given it by the entrance of Mrs. Morgan, who stated that the doctor had but just left home to start by the ten o'clock train, and that he had certainly not anticipated

having any travelling companion, for he had not mentioned a word about it.

Even Alfred was astonished at his mother's anxiety and distress. At one moment she could hardly be restrained from following her daughter to town, but the hopelessness of finding her when there deterred her. He, chiefly through the impression given him by Theodora, had grown to imagine that their mother cared less about her than for the younger ones ; but now every thought seemed for the absent child.

‘She will be run over in the streets, as likely as not, poor child ! What does she know of London ? And how can she encounter the rudeness she will meet with ? Oh ! Alfred, you are very much to blame. To let her go, too, without any money in her pocket—without even a few shillings to get herself food ! Where she is to go at night ? It was perfect madness. Oh ! my Theo ! my Theo ! my poor, dear little helpless girl ! She has more courage and more spirit than all the rest of you put together ! She did not think for a moment of herself ! Alfred, you shall go after her by the very next train ; so, get ready.’

But there was not another train for three hours, and by that time a telegram had arrived from Mr. Morgan, saying that Theodora was in his care ; and from that moment the anxiety was transferred from herself to the object of her journey, and all looked eagerly for, and counted the hours until, her earliest possible return.

Upon arriving at Waterloo, Mr. Morgan procured a cab

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for Theodora, and inquired for her box, or bag, or whatever she had brought with her.

She told him she had not any with her.

‘Nothing with you!’ exclaimed he. ‘What are you going to do to-night? But I suppose, as you came without money to pay for a bed, perhaps you contemplated sleeping in the streets!’

‘I contemplated returning home in time,’ answered Theodora, feeling hurt at Mr. Morgan’s way of speaking.

‘Oh, Theo, you are certainly a dreadful little ignoramus! What would have become of you had I not met you?’

‘I am very glad that you did,’ she answered; ‘but I still think I had better go home as soon as I have seen the Duke of X——.’

‘You can’t, you goose; it is one o’clock now, and there is no train that stops at Chatterton after five o’clock. Fortunately, I have friends in town, and I shall take you there; but first you must have something to eat.’

‘No, indeed; I am not in the least hungry,’ said Theodora.

‘For all that, I insist upon your eating something. Now, Theo, I am going to give you a piece of advice, which I hope you will carry through life. It is a mistake into which many people fall—especially young people like you, although I know some old people just as bad—that of indifference to one’s own health. I believe that there are some who even imagine that they are acting unselfishly by starving themselves, and being indifferent to

their own comfort. Now, Theo, we are sent into the world by God to do certain work which is allotted to us. If by self-neglect we incapacitate ourselves for doing that work, we are guilty of a crime against God and against our fellow-creatures, to whom our talents are due. Do you understand me ?'

‘ Yes ; but I am really not hungry.’

‘ Then you all the more require something ; for it shows that your mental excitement has made you forget. I wish people would recollect that their bodies are given them in charge as well as their souls and their minds ; but there are a great many really good people in the world who seem to think of themselves as simply souls, and nothing else ; while they misuse and neglect their poor bodies, and might as well be without intellects for all the cultivation they give them.’

Mr. Morgan had been talking on as much to himself as to Theodora, until they arrived at a pastry-cook’s shop, where he insisted upon her eating sandwiches and taking some wine. Then they were once more in a cab, and driving towards Eaton Square. Theodora was too full of her own scheme to pay much attention even to the streets of London, although she was driving through them for the first time in her life.

When the cab stopped at one of the largest of the large houses in Eaton Square, Mr. Morgan got out and knocked at the door.

To Theodora’s astonishment, two men answered the knock. It seemed to her absurd, as I suppose it does

to most other people, that it should require one great lout to give an answer, and another overgrown fellow to show the way. All this occurred to Theodora afterwards, but she thought she did not notice anything at the time.

The servants affected not to know whether the Duke was at home or not. Mr. Morgan desired one of them to go and inquire ; and, after staring at him for a minute, the man moved slowly away. Theodora's impatience had not allowed her to remain in the cab : by this time she was standing by the side of Mr. Morgan ; and the remaining servant stared still more when Theodora said rapidly—

‘I know the Duke of X—— is at home. I saw him just now at one of the upper windows ; I am sure it was he.’

‘My dear,’ said Mr. Morgan, ‘I will walk up and down here until you are ready. I suppose you will not be very long.’ Then, turning to the servant, he said : ‘Be so good as to show this lady into a room. She cannot stand here while your fellow-servant is looking for your master.’

The man, who had all this while kept his head on one side, scrutinizing the visitors as if they had been curious animals, moved away as if he had corns, and opened the door of a small room on the ground floor.

Theodora was much longer at the Duke of X——’s than Mr. Morgan had expected. He got tired of waiting. He walked backwards and forwards, until he thought he knew every flower in every window front

on that side of the square ; and still Theodora did not come out.

But she came at length ; and an old gentleman, who was the Duke of X——, brought her to the door and placed her in the cab.

Then Theodora threw herself back in the carriage when she found herself alone, and burst into a torrent of tears.

‘Poor child ! poor child ! no doubt it is a great disappointment, but it is no more than I expected,’ thought Mr. Morgan.

He let her cry uninterruptedly for a little while ; then wishing to soothe her, he placed his hand upon hers, and said—

‘We will go to my sister’s house, Theo ; she will be glad to see you, my dear, and will make you comfortable. Come, come, don’t cry about it any more ; that’s a good girl.’

But Theodora looked up from her pocket-handkerchief, and with a great sigh said—

‘Oh, I am so glad ! I am so happy !’

‘So glad ! so happy !’ exclaimed Mr. Morgan. ‘Then what on earth are you crying for, you goose ?’

‘I couldn’t help it,’ said Theodora. ‘Listen, and I will tell you all about it from the beginning to the end.’

But I think I can tell it quicker than Theodora did, with all the interruptions she met with from Mr. Morgan’s remarks and comments ; so we will have it, as she said, from beginning to end.



## CHAPTER VII.

Theodora's interview with the Duke of X——Her frank request—  
The Duke complies with it—Mr. Morgan is greatly astonished.

**A**LTHOUGH Theodora had been so confident of success, yet, when she found herself alone in the room waiting for the Duke, her heart failed her. It was a small room, evidently intended as a lobby; but it would have made little difference to her had it been a gorgeously furnished drawing-room, for Theodora was happily very little influenced by outside appearances; indeed, she was constitutionally rather too indifferent and unobservant of such things. Her heart failed her because her enterprise was so very near; and as the man with corns and his head on one side closed the door, it burst upon her mind, that perhaps she might not be certain of success.

Have you ever waited in a dentist's room until your turn came to have your tooth pulled out? Theodora felt very much like that.

But the interview with the Duke was not so immediate

as she expected. The servant walked away, and forgot all about her ; he had not had the slightest intention of informing his Grace of her wish to see him ; and it was not until nearly an hour after he had shut the door upon her that he remembered her existence, and returned to the lobby.

‘His Grace is hout,’ said he impudently, ‘so it is of no use waiting to see ‘im : He’ve been out nearly a hour.’ And the man threw the door wide open, that Theodora might take her departure. At that moment a step descended the staircase, and a good-humoured voice said, rather loudly—

‘Who are you telling falsehoods to about me ? eh ! Why, you saw me at home five minutes ago, you rascal.’

‘Why, I did not wish your Grace to be disturbed, as your Grace’s health—’ commenced the man, closing the room door.

Then Theodora heard the Duke ask, ‘Who is it ?’ and the man answered something in a very humble tone. She was very much afraid that the Duke would escape her even now, and pushing open the door of the lobby, she ran into the hall.

‘Oh, do let me speak to you,’ said she ; ‘I will not keep you long. I must speak to you. My name is Theodora Astley. Do come in here for a few minutes.’

He looked surprised at her earnestness, and half irresolute ; but before he knew that he had followed her, he was in the lobby, and Theodora had shut the door.

‘You want to speak to me?’ said the Duke. ‘May I ask again your name, my dear young lady?’

‘Theodora Astley. I gave my name to the servant,’ said she.

To him she appeared so very young a girl—what he would have called almost a child; for, you see, the Duke of X—— was a man of fifty; and at that age, young people of sixteen do seem very young;—but he bowed, and said—

‘And why did you wish to speak to me?’

Theodora had imagined that the Duke would know her name as he had been so intimate with her father at college, and she said—

‘I thought that you would guess whose child I am if I told you my name. I am Hugh Astley’s daughter.’

‘Hugh Astley!’ said the Duke, changing countenance as he glanced at Theodora’s deep mourning. ‘It is true then! I thought I had read in the paper— You have lost—’

‘Yes,’ said Theodora, raising her eyes to his. ‘What you “thought you had read in the paper” is true. My father is dead. I fancied that he was your friend.’

The Duke of X—— was silent for a few moments. I think he was a little surprised at Theodora’s unsophisticated indifference to him. Then he said—

‘Yes, you are right. He and I were friends at Oxford.’

‘Friends!’ said Theodora; ‘and yet you have forgotten that he is dead or alive! I have been taught that a “friend loveth at all times.”’

‘My dear little girl,’ said the Duke of X——, ‘you do not take into account the different paths and the different interests to which my duties in life and those of your father naturally led. I regret that for many years past I have known so little of your father; but you wrong me if you think it is without sorrow that I know he is dead.’

Theodora held out her hand forgivingly; and the Duke held it in his and patted it as he spoke.

‘And now tell me what brings Hugh Astley’s daughter here, so soon after her father’s death?’

‘I want you to do something for Alfred,’ said Theodora.

‘And who is Alfred?’ asked the Duke.

‘My brother. He was always intended for a sailor; but now my mother cannot put him into the navy, for she is not rich. She has only £200 a year,’ said Theodora.

‘Only £200 a year!’ said the Duke of X——, to whom that sum appeared only one remove from starvation.

‘Yes. She would gladly pay for Alfred; only, you see, there are so many of us.’

‘And is your brother—is Alfred ready to go to sea?’

‘He would have to go to the Naval College first, you know,’ said Theodora.

‘What is your name?’ asked the Duke.

‘Theodora.’

‘And, Theodora,’ said the Duke of X——, ‘did your mother send you to me?’

‘Oh no, she knows nothing about it, or did not until I had left. It was my own idea.’

‘You surely did not come alone, child?’

'Mr. Morgan, a great friend of papa's, happened to come in the same train. He took care of me; but I should have come all the same without him,' said Theodora.

'I have no doubt of it,' said he, as if speaking to himself; then to her he said, 'And what do you wish me to do, Theodora?'

'To put Alfred to the Naval College,' she answered, 'and send him to sea afterwards.'

He could not help smiling at the coolness of the request; and Theodora, seeing it, asked, 'Why do you laugh?'

Thereupon the Duke of X—— laughed aloud, and said, 'What a little unworldly innocent maiden you are!'

'But will you do it?' asked she.

'But you are as practical as you are innocent. Yes, I will do it, my child; not for your father's sake only, but for the sake of your father's daughter. Now tell me more about your mother and the rest of them, and Albert?'

'Alfred,' said Theodora, correcting him.

'Alfred! yes. I am a bad hand at names; but I remember yours, for it is such a nice one—Theodora.'

Then Theodora told him all particulars about her family, and the difficulties they were likely to meet with; and at the end the Duke of X—— said: 'I will write to Mrs. Astley before long. Will you give my compliments to her, and say so from me? You must have a glass of wine.'

He was about to ring the bell, but Theodora would

not let him ; and, as I said before, he himself accompanied her to the hall door.

To Theodora it seemed but a commonplace interview between a lady and gentleman ; but had she known how difficult it was usually to get audience of the Duke of X—, she would have esteemed herself blessed above measure in having been able to get into his presence at all, as it so happened at the time he was under his doctor's hands, and was not supposed to attend to anything like business.

As the Duke of X— turned to reascend the broad staircase of his house, his heart smote him in an unaccustomed way for the many years' neglect of his college friend, to whom he had been so much indebted in those days of scrapes and examinations, and he felt glad that he had found an opportunity of being kind to one of Hugh Astley's children.

When Mr. Morgan had heard from Theodora the whole account of her interview with the Duke, he did not know whether he felt most surprised or most pleased. It was so contrary to his expectations that she should succeed ; and yet she appeared so utterly unconscious that she had done anything unusual, that Mr. Morgan, like the Duke of X—, felt inclined to laugh. However, he said—

‘ And now, what have you to cry about, you silly child ? ’

‘ I don't know ; I feel so happy and so grateful,’ said Theodora.

‘ You are over-excited, that's what it is.’

‘Can’t I go home to-night, Mr. Morgan? I want so much to tell Alfred and mamma.’

‘Certainly not; besides, you have been so long about your business, that I doubt if we could in any wise catch a train. You are coming now to my sister.’





## CHAPTER VIII.

Real heroism—The Duke of X—— is as good as his word—Preparations for sending Alfred to college—Gertrude's insubordination—Theodora thinks of earning her own living—Master Bob's idea of something 'gentlemanly.'

**G**HERE was great rejoicing in the house when, on the following day, Theodora ran into the drawing-room at home. Her mother embraced her, and held her to her heart in a manner which Theodora never remembered before. Everything showed how anxiously she had been expected. The tea was made ; the toast was keeping hot by the fire ; there was cold meat on the table, in case she should be hungry ; and jam, and honey, and a cake.

'Now, my dear child, take off your things, and have a cup of tea the first thing ; and, Theo, dear, don't look so pale and anxious. I know all the kindness of your intention in going to London to try to help Alfred ; but I am quite prepared for the disappointment : indeed, it will not be a disappointment to me, for I do not expect anything but failure.'

‘But it is not failure, dear mamma ; it is all success ; it is as right as it possibly could be.’

‘You do not mean to say — you cannot mean that the Duke actually promised to do anything ? But even if he did,’ added Mrs. Astley, with a sigh, ‘there is no way of getting over the college.’

‘But, mamma, it is got over. I did not ask the Duke to do only half. He will see to Alfred ; he will send him to college.’

‘Theodora !’ said Mrs. Astley, looking frightened, ‘you did not surely ask the Duke of X — to do so much as that ?’

‘It would have been of no use for him to help Alf into the navy, mother, if he had not first been to college,’ said Theodora simply. ‘Indeed the first thing he asked was, had Alfred been prepared for sea ?’

‘I cannot think, my dear, how you could have had the face to ask him so much as you did.’

‘Why, mamma, he was a friend of dear papa’s. Surely nothing is too much to do for those who belong to a friend ?’ said Theodora.

It was very pleasant to Theodora to be treated as she was henceforth, as her mother’s friend and adviser. From the moment of her father’s death a new life seemed to be opened to her—a life of practical usefulness. Theodora had been used in the days of her childhood to dream of great acts of self-devotion and heroism, and to wish that she had been born a Joan of Arc, or in the days of the early and persecuted Christians, to be a martyr

to her faith. Before she had done with this troublesome world, she found that the days of heroism and martyrdom are still ; and that, in these apparently commonplace times, as self-devoted and as noble deeds may be done as ever were done. That is, she might have known it, had she viewed herself as others learned to look upon her ; but she no more thought any future action of her life heroic, than she now imagined she had done anything unusual in her journey to London on Alfred's behalf.

The Duke of X—— was as good as his word. Before long Mrs. Astley heard from him. In his letter he requested permission, as a token of his friendship for Mr. Astley, to place his son 'Albert' at one of the naval colleges at Portsmouth ; and begged Mrs. Astley to look upon him as a friend in the matter, who, having no child of his own, would feel an interest in the son of his college chum.

'There !' exclaimed Theodora, 'if he does not call him Albert again ! I told him it was not Albert.'

'Well, Theo, I don't think we can find fault with such a little mistake, when his conduct is so kind. What did you do to him, child, to make him feel so interested in you ?'

'He is not interested in me, mamma ; it is for papa's sake. I daresay he will never give me another thought.'

There were, of course, preparations to be made before Alfred could be sent to the college, and all in the house were required to be busy. Theodora gladly gave her help,—indeed, she, as usual, did more than any one else ; and even little Edith assisted ; but Gertrude was no more

inclined to be useful and amiable now than she had been in the days when she was not required to work for work's sake.

'Gertie,' said Theodora, after her mother had several times desired her to help, and Gertrude had, by her shrugs and cross face, showed her unwillingness to do so, 'do unpick this waistcoat for me. We must all learn to work now, you know, for we cannot live idle at home.'

'Pray, who made you the mistress, Miss Theodora?' asked Gertrude. 'I hate work, and I don't intend to work; so there's for you! You may unpick your old waistcoat yourself.'

Theodora gave no answer, but she was surprised at the severe tone in which her mother spoke to Gertrude.

'How dare you speak in that way to your sister, Gertrude? Theodora is perfectly right in what she says. I only wish that you were more like her. If you are not going to work, how do you expect to live?'

'Live!' said Gertrude; 'I suppose I shall live as other people do; but I hate work.'

'What will you do when I die?' asked Mrs. Astley.

'Oh, I shall be married before that,' said Gertrude, tossing her head.

'It does not follow, my dear. Many girls do not marry. But in any case, Gertrude, you will not marry for many years; and meanwhile it would be most unfair in you to be the only idle one at home. I insist upon your doing what you can. Unpick that waistcoat at once.'

Gertrude took the waistcoat sulkily, because she dared

not actually refuse ; but from that hour a feeling of sullen rebellion was in her heart against her sister Theodora,—a feeling with which she tried to inoculate her brother Bob, who had always been her principal friend.

This conversation about the work set Theodora thinking about her own future, and it was not long before she talked it over with her mother. It was necessary that Mrs. Astley should be relieved of some of her numerous family. Theodora had as little idea as most girls of her age of the value of money, but she knew enough to be aware that two hundred a year was not much, with such a large family as theirs was.

‘So you see, mamma, that I must set about making money ; or, at least, I must no longer be burdensome on you,’ said she in conclusion.

‘I feel as if I could spare you the least of any of them, Theo,’ said Mrs. Astley, unable to restrain the tears which fell from her eyes. ‘You see what Gertrude is ; she will do nothing to help ; and when we are in a small house, with but one servant, I hardly know what I shall do.’

Theodora looked at her mother inquiringly.

‘Of course we shall have to move from here very shortly, to make room for the new rector,’ said Mrs. Astley.

‘I never thought of that ; yes, of course,’ said Theodora.  
‘Poor mamma ! it will be very painful for you.’

She did not say how painful it would be to her also, although a sharp pain went through her heart at being told what, curiously enough, she had not thought of. You must not think Theodora stupid because she so often

forgets what would be so plain to other people. It was a part of her character to be oblivious to many commonplace things and facts ; and now, the fact that she must no longer look upon her father's house as her home came upon her as a blow. But she said nothing of this to her mother. She kissed her, and comforted her, and spoke cheerfully of the future ; and none but God knew how she cried about it when by herself. Theodora was becoming all that her father had wished and prayed to see her ; and meanwhile Gertrude was complaining of her to her brother Bob.

'I won't stand it,' said Gertrude. 'Theodora is setting herself up over all of us ; and now she has got hold of some new crotchetts about work ; and mamma must needs take her part. I am not going to work, I can tell her ; I am a lady, and not a dressmaker or a housemaid.'

'Of course you are,' said Bob, not quite knowing how to answer his sister ; and supposing, like Gertrude, that it would be most like a lady to be idle. 'Of course you are ; and I am a gentleman, I hope.'

'Well, I'll just tell you what they are going to do with you, then,' said Gertrude. 'I heard mamma and Miss Theo talking about it ; they are always having confabs now. They are going to write to Uncle William about putting you into some horrid counting-house ; and you will have to work hard enough there, I can tell you. I wouldn't stand it if I were a boy. I would run away and turn—' Gertrude paused, not knowing quite how to finish her sentence.

‘Turn what?’ said Bob.

‘Oh, highwayman, or—or anything gentlemanly.’

‘Or pickpocket, or thief,’ put in Alfred, who had joined them without their seeing him. ‘I say, Miss Gertie, I think your lectures on gentlemanliness are rather a mistake. I doubt whether you know what makes a gentleman or lady, so you had best shut up.’

Gertrude looked disdainful, but followed her brother’s advice; for she was no match for Alfred, she knew well.





## CHAPTER IX.

Change of quarters—‘Parler du soleil et voila dejà les rayons’—  
Mr. Morgan proposes putting Gertrude to school—Her violent  
opposition—Theodora’s plans of work.

**G**HE move from the rectory had been made. There was but little time, in the bustle of packing, and in the fatigue of each day’s work, to dream over the past, and make useless regrets. Mrs. Astley had taken a very small, low-rented cottage, in the village where she had lived all her married life. She could live more cheaply here than elsewhere, and here she had still friends. Gertrude had hoped that her mother would have gone to some new place, which was not so dull as she considered Chatterton; for she had no sentimental feelings connected with her home, and she had tried her best to persuade Mrs. Astley to live in some town. She was now very much put out at her non-success, and spent her whole time in sulking silently, or giving rude answers when spoken to.

‘What am I to do with her?’ said Mrs. Astley, after a fresh ebullition of temper from Gertrude, followed by her

exit, with the door slammed after her. ‘She is quite beyond my control. She never would obey any one but your dear father ; and now he is gone, she sets me at defiance ;’ and Mrs. Astley burst into tears, for Gertrude’s unkindness and wickedness cut her more deeply than anything.

‘Well, don’t cry about it, mother dear,’ said Alfred, kissing her. ‘I should try a good smart whipping if I were you.’

‘My dear,’ said Mrs. Astley, smiling in spite of herself. ‘Why, Gertrude could more easily give me a whipping than I could her ; and really, I should say she is quite capable of doing it.’

‘I have been thinking over my plans, mamma,’ said Theodora, wishing to change the subject ; ‘and when I have told you them, I am afraid you will think them very limited. I wish Mr. Morgan—’

At that instant Mr. Morgan entered, saying, ‘Who is talking about me behind my back ? Oh, Theo ! Well, I can trust her with my character. What are you wishing about me, my dear ?’

‘I was going to say, I wish Mr. Morgan would come, and talk over with us, what we were about to speak of. How funny that you should come at the moment !’

‘Well, I was come for the same purpose, to talk over your plans. I have been thinking about Gertrude. It is a pity she should not go to school. Now that her poor father is not here to teach her, I am afraid she will be too much for you, Mrs. Astley.’

Mrs. Astley could hardly forbear from saying aloud, 'How wonderful!' for it seemed as if Mr. Morgan must have been thinking over the subject at the same time as themselves.

'I fear the same,' said she aloud; 'but you know, Mr. Morgan, that I can no more put Gertrude at school than I can Alfred. If she would submit to be taught, I could go on with her education; but I fear she will be a great trouble to me. If she was only more like—' and Mrs. Astley nodded her head towards Theodora, whose face was turned away from her.

'Oh!' thought Mr. Morgan, 'so my little Theo is beginning to be appreciated already!' Then he said aloud—'Of course not, my dear madam; but you may have heard of a school at Brighton for the daughters of clergymen. Perhaps we could get interest to admit Gertrude.'

'Oh! it would be the very thing; and then she might be educated to earn her own living. Gertrude has not the least idea of our poverty, nor the slightest wish to make herself of use at home; and yet all my children must learn to work for themselves,' said Mrs. Astley.

'Of course, of course,' Mr. Morgan answered. 'Then I will, with your leave, canvass for votes; and if she can get in before next spring, so much the better.'

'And she won't go, if you get her in,' screamed Gertrude, bursting into the room. 'I am not going to be turned into a governess or teacher, or anything of that sort, I can tell you. So you may keep your votes to yourself.'

‘Gertrude, I am ashamed of you !’ said her mother.

Gertrude stood trembling with passion, and unable to answer. When, after a time, she could speak, she said—

‘It is all Theodora’s doing, I know. She wouldn’t mind being a scullery-maid, with her vulgar tastes ; but I am a lady.’

‘It is a pity that your ladylike prejudices did not prevent your listening at the door,’ observed Mr. Morgan. ‘You do not know what a lady means, Gertrude. Theodora is the lady of the two, you may be sure.’

Gertrude bounced out of the room as suddenly as she had entered it, and Mrs. Astley could do nothing but cry.

‘Pray don’t distress yourself in this way about that naughty girl,’ said Mr. Morgan ; but Mrs. Astley could only answer—

‘I feel wretched about Gertrude ; she was not so in her father’s lifetime, but she will not submit to my control. I fear that she will be a great difficulty to me.’

‘Well, it is of no use meeting difficulties half-way,’ said Mr. Morgan ; ‘we must hope that the discipline of school will put her in order. And now, about Theo.’

Mrs. Astley smiled as Mr. Morgan asked the question, for this was a pleasanter subject than the last.

‘I suppose there is nothing for Theo, poor child, but to become qualified for a governess or companion.’

‘Don’t pity me, mamma,’ said Theodora. ‘I rather like the idea of it, excepting for having to leave you. I suppose,’ said she, turning to Mr. Morgan, ‘I should

have to go to school also? Are there not places where people can learn to be governesses, in exchange for doing all the dirty work?

Mr. Morgan laughed.

‘What do you mean by dirty work?’ he asked.

‘Well, counting the clothes for the wash, darning the stockings, washing the children’s faces, and that sort of thing. I have been used to all that, you know.’

‘Yes; I believe that young people are taught on such conditions to be governesses, Theo. We must see about it, and talk it over another time. And how do you like your new cottage, Mrs. Astley?’ said the doctor, turning to the mistress of the house.

Theodora saw that he wished to change the subject, so she said no more of the governessing; but when she followed Mr. Morgan to the garden gate, she resumed it.

‘Why did you say, “talk it over another time?” There is no time to be wasted. How can mamma keep the whole lot of us on two hundred a year? If no one else wishes to help her, I will; but I know that Alfred will also. Do, dear Mr. Morgan, inquire about something for me. I shall have to take in plain needlework or washing if you do not.’

‘My dear Theo, my dear little girl, you don’t know what you are thinking of. You can have no idea of the life of drudgery you are speaking of.’

‘Cannot I guess?’ said Theodora, her eyes flashing with tears. ‘Do you think that if I have been a child until now, that this grief and trial and difficulty can leave

me any longer a child? Do you think I look forward with any pleasure to such a life as that of a school-teacher? But it is a necessity, it must be done; for I can do anything, endure anything, but add to my poor mother's difficulties,' and she burst into tears.

'It shall be done,' said Mr. Morgan, his own eyes glittering. 'I will see about it at once.' And as Theodora left him, he murmured: 'Brave little girl! noble-hearted little woman! God bless her!'





## CHAPTER X.

Mr. Morgan brings news of a situation for Theodora—Mrs. Astley finds it very hard to part with her children—Alfred leaves home for the Naval College—Theodora visits her father's grave—Little Edith.

**T**WAS not long before Mr. Morgan had something to tell Theodora. He came one evening full of news. He had heard of a vacancy in a large girl's school at Worthing; had applied for it; and had every prospect of obtaining it for Theodora. It seemed to promise as well, or better than Mr. Morgan had expected, and he felt and looked in good spirits about it. His cheerfulness infected Mrs. Astley; so that she spoke confidently of the years of Theodora's probation; and, beyond that, of the time when she would be able to undertake the position of a governess, and everything would be delightful.

‘Alf will be a lieutenant by that time.’

‘Nonsense, mother,’ said Alfred, who was spending his last evening at home. ‘Do you mean to keep Theo drudging at that school for the next eight or ten years? Although, perhaps, it might be less of drudgery than she will have to go through as a governess to a lot of ill-

tempered children. I don't like the idea of this governessing for Theo, I must say. It would be a capital thing for Gertie, for it will bring down her self-conceit.'

'Perhaps it will bring down mine also,' said Theodora.  
'Besides, the children need not be ill-tempered, Alf.'

'I am sure they will be; and you had much better come as ship-boy when I go to sea. I'll look after you, and see you don't get bullied,' said Alfred.

'What is the name of the schoolmistress?' asked Theodora.

'My dear Theo,' said Mr. Morgan, 'you must really be more particular in your modes of expression. You mean the lady of the establishment, of which I have been speaking? Mrs. Toogood.'

'Too good you are,  
Too good you be ;  
I see you are  
Too good for me,'

sung Alfred, to no tune at all.

'Well, I hope she won't turn out too bad, instead of Toogood,' said Theodora.

'You must leave off making jokes upon your missus's name, Theo.'

'So I will before she becomes my missus, but allow me to do so until then. You know, Mr. Morgan, my laughing days are nearly over.'

Theodora spoke gaily, but she caught her breath immediately afterwards, and her mother sighed; while Gertrude observed—

'I am sure I won't part with my laughing days so soon. I'd snap my fingers in Mrs. Toogood's face, if she told me not to laugh.'

'Then I am afraid Mrs. Toogood would have to show you the door,' said Mr. Morgan.

'And I shouldn't care for that,' said Gertrude.

'This school seems to be just what we have been thinking of,' said Mrs. Astley, who had been reading the lady's letter to Mr. Morgan.

'In fact, too good to be true,' said Alfred.

'Now, Alfred dear, don't be a goose,' said Mrs. Astley. 'I am sure any one would think we were talking of very different subjects than parting with one another, by the absurd spirits you are in.'

'Well, mother, what is the good of crying and snivelling over what must be? I am a laughing philosopher. I always admired What's-his-name much more than the other fellow, Thingamy.'

'We seem destined to split up our household, and be scattered in all directions,' said Mrs. Astley. 'This morning I have a letter from my brother—a very kind one, certainly—falling into my views. He says he will take Bob into his counting-house at once, and that he will give him board and lodging with himself, until Bob can afford the expense of maintaining himself.'

'Well, nothing can be kinder, I am sure,' said Mr. Morgan.

'Yes; and I ought to be very grateful; indeed, I am so,' said poor Mrs. Astley, breaking down. 'But, Mr.

Morgan, it is hard to part with my children, and so many of them at once, and so soon after—'

‘Of course it is hard; I know you must feel it so,’ said her kind friend; ‘but we must try to look at the bright side of it all. It would have been much harder to have had them all left upon your hands, unable to do anything for their own support. It is a creditable thing, Mrs. Astley, and a thing to be proud of, to have children who are so anxious and ready to help themselves, and to relieve you of the burden of them.’

‘It is, it is,’ said she, ‘and I am proud of my children. I should like them to know and feel that I love them all the more, if possible, for their unselfish independence.’

Gertrude at this juncture tossed her head, for she knew that this praise did not include her.

‘As for Willy, I can easily continue to send him to Miss Watts,’ the day-school where most of the children of the village of Chatterton went to learn to read and write. ‘And, of course, I can teach the little ones myself,’ said Mrs. Astley.

‘Oh! I can teach the little ones, mamma,’ said Edith; ‘they always mind me.’

‘No, my darling; I shall want you to mind baby,’ said Mrs. Astley. ‘You must be my nurse-maid, Edie; besides, you will have to help so much in the house, you know.’

‘Oh yes, of course,’ said Edith, with great importance. ‘Those children make so much work always.’

It seemed as if every one who had known Mr. Astley

was endeavouring to show kindness to his widow and children ; and Alfred left his home and family with a cheerful feeling that all things would go well with them in his absence. Before he left, he had a long talk with Bob ; and the latter, who was as easily influenced for good as for evil, said goodbye to his elder brother with a firm determination to act like a man,—to do his best in his new situation with his uncle, and to forget all the foolish advice of Gertrude.

Before leaving home, Theodora left the house one evening alone to visit the grave of her father. As she stood in the churchyard looking at it, and wondering what might or might not happen before she should see it again, little Edith ran up to her.

‘I saw you go out, Theo,’ she said, ‘and I felt quite sure you were coming to see papa again before you go.’

Theodora only answered her by taking her warm little hand in hers and holding it. Edith did not appear inclined to break the silence ; perhaps, with the discernment of a clever child, she thought Theodora would not wish it ; but she sighed in a little impatient way several times.

At length Theodora said to her, ‘Well, Edie dear, what is it? I know you are longing to speak.’

‘Isn’t it a pity, Theo,’ said Edith, ‘that papa should have no gravestone? He was better than anybody else in the world, and no gravestone! There is Mr. Hall out there, who was not near so good or nice as papa, and only a grocer, Theo ; and look what a lovely gravestone

he has! I sometimes could cry to think of it when I go to bed, only that I tumble to sleep too fast.'

'But, Edie,' said Theodora, 'there is no need of a gravestone to tell us or anybody how good papa was; we all know it.'

'Yes,' said Edith, 'but people will talk, you see, Theo; and it teases mamma,—I know it does. Now, I'll just tell you about that horrid Mrs. Simpson.'

'She is not horrid, Edie; she is very kind.'

'Well, no, not generally; I mean only in this. To-day, when you were out, Theo, she came, and presently she said to mamma, "And I suppose, of course, you will be putting up a monument to dear Mr. Astley;" and mamma said, "I am afraid not; I cannot afford it at present." Mamma ought to have smacked her face and said, "Mind your own business." I would.'

'Edie, Edie,' said Theodora, almost laughing, 'what a little impetuous piece of trumpery you are, my child! Fancy mamma slapping Mrs. Simpson's face!'

'But, Theo, don't you think dear papa ought to have a tombstone?'

'Yes, Edie, I do.'

'Well, Theo,' said the little girl, 'so does mamma. You know mamma often talks to me when you are out, Theo, never to Gertrude; and when Mrs. Simpson was gone, she said, "I wish I could afford to put a gravestone over papa, but I can't;" and I said, "Will it cost a great deal?" and she said, "Four or five pounds, if not more, and I must save every shilling for your brothers, Edie."

And then, Theo,' continued Edith, lowering her voice, 'then poor mamma began to cry, and she called out, "Not because I would not try all I can, but my first duty is to my children. You yourself would say so ; I believe it would be your wish." I think, Theo, that she was talking to papa.'





## CHAPTER XI.

Prospect House—Mrs. Toogood—Things do not appear very cheerful—Theodora taken to the schoolroom—Summoned to the drawing-room—The head teacher, Miss Terry—Theodora's dulness—She has to run the gauntlet of the schoolroom—Isabel Howard.

**H**E day arrived upon which Theodora was to take her place as one of the inmates of Mrs. Toogood's 'establishment.' Mr. Morgan, with his usual kindness, volunteered to take her. She understood, vaguely, that in return for instructing the smallest of the children, and making herself generally useful, she was to be qualified for a governess or school-teacher; but of what was expected of her she really knew nothing.

'Prospect House'—that was the name of the seminary for young ladies—was an ugly red brick building, which required some prospect to make it at all bearable; but, unfortunately, the builder or owner had thought only of the sound or sentiment of the name, for there was no prospect attached to it that was at all inviting, excepting, as Theodora observed as she stood upon the door-step, the prospect of some day leaving it.





Theodora is introduced to Mrs. Toogood.—*Page 65.*

‘You are an incorrigible girl, Theo ; you must leave off saying such things when you get within the walls.’

‘I couldn’t, Mr. Morgan. I think not even twenty years of governessing would knock what little fun I have out of me.’

‘Hush ! we must play propriety,’ said her friend, as a very neat servant opened the door.

In a few moments they were shown into a drawing-room which was empty of all but furniture, and shortly afterwards Mrs. Toogood entered. She was tall and stiff, and, Theodora thought, forbidding in appearance. She curtsied generally, and then looked at Mr. Morgan as if expecting him to speak.

‘This is Miss Astley,’ said he.

‘Miss Astley !’ echoed Mrs. Toogood ; ‘she is very young.’

‘I shall be seventeen in six months’ time,’ said Theodora.

Mrs. Toogood glanced at her, as if she was surprised at her presuming to answer, and again addressed Mr. Morgan.

‘I think,’ said she ; ‘that we understand entirely the terms upon which Miss Astley resides in my establishment?’

‘Why can’t she say “lives in my house?”’ thought Theodora.

‘Yes, I think so, madam ; and I believe my little friend is quite prepared to give her services, such as you may require, in return for your care of her. I hope she will be happy, and will go on well.’

‘Her being happy depends upon Miss Astley’s performance of her duty,’ said Mrs. Toogood, rigidly.

Mr. Morgan evidently felt uncomfortable, and wished the interview at an end ; so he made no further delay in taking his leave. Theodora fancied her last gleam of happiness was going as Mr. Morgan held her hand and wished her goodbye. She stood looking after him, blinded by her tears, until she was brought back to clearer sight by the touch of Mrs. Toogood, which made the tears fall from her eyes.

‘Miss Astley,’ said that lady, ‘it is natural you should feel distressed at parting with your friends, but you must beware of giving way to this sort of thing. Our life here below is one scene of farewells and partings ; it is the common lot.’

Now this was not a cheerful way of looking at life in the midst of Theodora’s first grief at saying goodbye. Mrs. Toogood did not mean to be unkind ; she said what she thought was the appropriate thing to say ; but instead of soothing Theodora, she irritated her. However, her speech had the wished-for result of drying her tears.

‘We will now go to the schoolroom,’ resumed Mrs. Toogood ; and without further preface, she marshalled the way.

Any one might have found the schoolroom blindfold, being guided only by the hum of voices. Theodora, in her ignorance of every kind of life but the quiet life of Chatterton, felt astonished and confused. She had expected, at least, that the girls would have looked in a

friendly and kind way at her; but most of them, especially those of her own age, stared at her, and then whispered together in what Theodora thought a very unladylike manner.

‘Young ladies,’ said Mrs. Toogood,—and at the sound of her voice there was a hush throughout the room,—‘Young ladies, this is Miss Astley. Miss Astley will have her instructions from me, and I expect that you will attend to them through her. Miss Terry, you will have the goodness to inform Miss Astley of some of her duties.’

‘Yes ‘m,’ replied Miss Terry, looking as if admiringly at Mrs. Toogood; ‘most certainly, ma’am.’

‘I wonder,’ thought Theodora, ‘what she looks at Mrs. Toogood so far? Perhaps she is very fond of her.’

The mistress left the room, and the Babel of voices began.

‘Why, she’s no older than I am, I’ll be bound! What a chit-faced thing! I shan’t attend to anything she says.’

‘Who is she in mourning for, I wonder?’

‘Lor! how red her eyes are!—and such remarks, until poor Theodora, unaccustomed to such ill-breeding, felt her cheeks burn, and hardly knew where to look.

‘Silence, mesdemoiselles!’ screamed Miss Terry; ‘votre Fénelon s’il vous plait, la troisième classe.’ Then turning to Miss Astley, she said, ‘That is your desk; you had best take your place.’ And she waved her hand towards a high desk, similar to the one at which she was herself seated.

Dim recollections of stories of boarding-schools floated

before the mind of Theodora as she sat down behind the desk. She had not much to do that afternoon but listen to the mechanical and monotonous repetitions of the classes, or the wretched attempts at reading made by the elder girls, and occasionally finding an opportunity of helping some small child who had got into a hobble with her sum.

School-time for the present came to an end, and the bell rang for tea. Wearied as Theodora felt, she could not contrive to swallow the thick bread and butter which the other girls seemed so much to enjoy. Before many days, she had quite forgotten whether it was thick or thin.

When tea was over, and the girls had dispersed about the garden, Theodora received a summons from Mrs. Toogood to attend her in the drawing-room; and upon obeying it, she found there also the head teacher, Miss Terry.

‘I have a few things to mention to you, Miss Astley,’ commenced Mrs. Toogood, as Theodora entered the room. ‘I daresay Miss Terry will have the goodness to put you in the way of your everyday duties?’

Miss Terry murmured an assent.

‘But there are some things of which I ought to speak myself.’

‘Hm-m-m-m,’ went Miss Terry.

Theodora glanced towards her, thinking that she was going to speak; but she was only humming approval. All this time Mrs. Toogood did not ask Theodora to sit down.

‘You understand, of course,’ resumed the mistress, ‘that you will have to walk out with the young ladies.

You must be careful to enforce decorum. Should you ever be left in charge of any portion of the establishment during the time of outdoor exercise, you will be exact in going nowhere—not an inch of ground beyond what your directions permit.'

Theodora was saying to herself, 'When you go out with the girls alone, mind you go nowhere but where you have been told.' She had a habit of putting fine expressions into simple words, and thinking how much better they sounded; and now the thought followed: 'Shall I ever grow to express myself in such picked and discreet language?'

But Miss Terry seemed to admire the diction of her superior very much indeed. She kept up a running fire of purrs and little ejaculations of surprise and delight.

'I will be careful to attend to your directions,' said Theodora.

'Not very respectful—superior—condescension,' murmured Miss Terry, with intermediate words, the sound of which Theodora could not arrive at.

'What do you mean, Miss Terry?' asked she; 'in what way have I been disrespectful?'

'Most usual; yes; in addressing—h-m-m. A young person in a subordinate situation; take advantage of the kind consideration of—Mrs. Toogood's forbearance. Most admirable, I am sure, and cannot be sufficiently held up as an example.'

'I really do not understand what you mean, madam,' said Theodora, feeling and looking very much offended.

‘Your sentences are so unfinished, that I cannot follow you at all.’

‘Miss Terry, with her customary recognition of due respect, Miss Astley, was reminding you that it is not usual to address your superior without any sign of the difference of station between us.’

‘H-m-m-m,’ went Miss Terry, moved almost to tears, at least to the blowing of her nose, by the noble sentiments of Mrs. Toogood, and her right appreciation of her own efforts as a toady.

‘What do you wish me to do, Mrs. Toogood?’ asked Theodora.

‘You do not hear Miss Terry address me without any respectful addition to her sentences.’

‘Oh dear, no; indeed, wouldn’t think of presuming; know my position too well; though humble, respectful, I trust,’ murmured Miss Terry again.

Then it dawned upon Theodora what she was expected to do, and she replied—

‘I beg your pardon, *ma’am*, for appearing disrespectful. It was unintentional. You must make allowances for the newness of my present circumstances.’

But, unfortunately, in this interview Theodora had offended for ever the upper teacher, Miss Terry. Her words about her own indistinctness of expression, and a certain air of independence in Theodora, showing her to be afraid neither of herself nor of Mrs. Toogood, rankled in Miss Terry’s mind; and after circumstances did not serve to remove the evil feeling.

There was a general and cordial chattering going on amongst the girls, when Theodora left the drawing-room and returned to the schoolroom. Several of the elder girls—girls of sixteen to eighteen—were standing together; and as Theodora entered, they turned round, and one of them exclaimed—

‘Here she is! Now, Miss Astley, or whatever your name is, come here and answer some questions.’

The speaker was a tall, fine-looking girl, with flashing dark eyes; the sort of girl who would be a leader in any community where she was placed.

‘First tell us,’ continued the girl, as Theodora very unwillingly drew near—‘first tell us what makes you come here as an under scrub? I thought your father was a clergyman.’

‘My father was a clergyman,’ said Theodora.

‘Was he a gentleman?’ asked the girl rudely, at which question the others laughed loudly.

Theodora looked contemptuously at the speaker, and gave no answer.

‘Look at her!’ tittered another girl from behind the leading speaker; ‘look at her contemptuous face, Howard! That’s rather rich: an under scrub giving herself airs!’

Isabel Howard, the leading girl, and who was thus inelegantly addressed by her companions by her surname, as if she had been a boy, deliberately made the most hideous face she could manage at Theodora, and then she said, ‘Well, whatever your father may have been—

and I daresay he may have been a dogsmeat man—you must understand from the first that we won't put up with any airs. At any rate, you are not a young lady now.'

'I do not know what may be your idea of a lady,' said Theodora, speaking very slowly,—'not a very correct one, I should think, from your conduct; but my belief is, that no outward circumstances can alter a woman who has been born a lady.'

'Upon my word, a very fine speech; only the words are so grand, that we poor things cannot understand it. It is worthy of old Mother Toogood.'

Then began a quantity of banter and nonsense, levelled at Theodora, until she was obliged to take refuge in silence, for she could not find words to answer the girls with. It seemed to her very cruel that they should make such a set upon her within so few hours of her arrival.

Isabel Howard was the principal girl in the school. Later in her sojourn at Prospect House, Theodora learnt that Miss Howard was the daughter of a rich West Indian planter, and the only child and heiress of her father; also that the Bermudan ornaments in the drawing-room arrived through the favour of Isabel.

Now, as nothing is ever done in this world without marking its influence upon others, either for good or evil, so the example in the drawing-room was followed in the schoolroom; and in the same manner that Miss Terry toadied Mrs. Toogood, so some of the elder girls subserved to and flattered Miss Howard.

Then at the conclusion of this chattering, which was intended to be a war of wits, a slight, pale girl, with a cast in her eye, whose name was Lucy Watson, drew near to Theodora, and said in a whisper, so loud that it must have reached the hearing of Isabel Howard, as it was intended to do—

‘Is she not clever? And such lovely eyes too! If I had such eyes—oh!’

‘I don’t know about her being clever,’ said Theodora; ‘I have had no opportunity of telling, as I have only seen her for the first time to-day.’

‘But her face shows it,’ said Lucy Watson. ‘Besides, you heard how witty she was.’

‘No, I did not,’ said Theodora; ‘I only heard how rude she can be.’

Theodora spoke low, so that the object of her remark could not hear; but Lucy Watson determined that Isabel should be acquainted with what she said, and she observed aloud—

‘Well, I am surprised at your bad taste, Miss Astley. Everybody but you thinks Miss Howard extremely clever; and I expect you are just jealous of her, because of her being an heiress, when you are obliged to go out as a governess.’

Certainly these girls were very heartless, and yet I do not believe that any of them really understood how ~~crenely~~ they were treating the stranger. I believe if any one of them had, unseen to the others, and without fear of ridicule, discovered Theodora crying so bitterly as she

did that night after she went to bed, she would have tried her best to comfort her.

It was a greater trial to Theodora to find herself all at once in a subordinate situation, and looked upon by girls, perhaps not so well-born, and certainly not so well-bred as herself, as an inferior, in so far as she had been accustomed, in the little village of Chatterton, to be unusually petted and made much of; and her pride or independence induced her to take refuge in reserve, and in a determination to have as little as possible to do with the girls who treated her so unkindly. She might have been wiser had she tried to conciliate them by a more friendly manner; but having taken the idea that they did not want her society, and would repulse any advances she might make, everything that happened seemed to confirm that idea, and separate her more widely from her companions. I doubt if you or I would have acted more wisely than Theodora did. Were we placed in her position, perhaps we might have acted worse by returning rudeness for rudeness and sneers for sneers, until we carried on an open warfare.

I think that Isabel Howard and her companions were disappointed a little at the quiet way in which their attack upon Theodora passed off. They had expected, from the bright colour which flushed her face, and the contemptuous curl of her lip, to have, as one of them expressed it in school-girl language, 'got a rise out of her.'



## CHAPTER XII.

What is a toady?—The force of bad example—Bertha gets into trouble—Isabel Howard's falsehood—Which was the 'sneak'?—Isabel goes into hysterics—School *honour* and school-girl kindness.

**B**UT Theodora told no one what kind of night she had spent, and only to the little children, who said their lessons to her in the forenoon, was it apparent that something was wrong.

'She's been crying,' said one to the other, looking sideways at Theodora. 'Has Mrs. Toogood been scolding her?'

And then another: 'Won't Howard laugh if she sees her red eyes! Howard says it is like a sneak to cry. She *never* cries herself.'

This last remark made Theodora try to look as if she had not been crying; but the next moment she asked herself why she should care for the laughter of Isabel Howard.

She had not much time for reflection of any kind. Miss Terry had rapidly detailed to her the duties of the

day, without any loss of time in purrings and disjointed sentences, at the same time handing over to her an enormous quantity of unmended stockings, and other things wanting repair, bidding her occupy herself in the intervals of lessons in setting them in order.

‘Do you like darning stockings?’ asked a small child, after staring at her for some time instead of attending to her lesson.

‘No,’ said Theodora.

‘And do you like teaching girls like us?’

‘No.’

‘Then why did you come here? You’ll have to darn stockings all day. I wouldn’t if I were you.’

‘I cannot help it, my dear,’ said Theodora. ‘I wish I could.’

‘Do you like Mrs. Toogood?’ asked the child. ‘I don’t.’

Theodora tried to turn the subject.

‘And don’t you hate Miss Terry? I do; everybody does.’

‘Never mind Miss Terry, Bertha; go on with your lesson.’

‘No; I know my lesson—nearly, that is. I am sure you must hate Miss Terry, because you look nice. I like you very much, I do.’

‘Thank you, my dear; but you ought not to hate any one, you know.’

‘But everybody hates her. I say, what does a toady mean?’

‘A person who flatters another, and agrees with everything that is said.’

‘Then isn’t Miss Terry a toady?’ said Bertha. ‘She flatters Mrs. Toogood, and she flatters Howard. Isn’t she, now?’

Theodora gave no answer.

‘Isn’t she?’

‘Learn your lesson, Bertha, and leave Miss Terry alone,’ said Theodora.

‘You’re laughing. I see you think she is. It was Howard called her a toady; I am glad you think her one too.’

Theodora did think Miss Terry a toady; so, not knowing how to answer the child, she again told her to go on with her lesson.

Shortly afterwards, the class to which little Bertha belonged was called up to repeat the multiplication table to Miss Terry.

Bertha appeared very busy in examining her fingers several times during the repetition; and was told to place her hands behind her, after which change of attitude her memory appeared always to become confused.

All at once Miss Terry seized one of Bertha’s hands, and discovered various figures crowded together upon her nails, evidently as reminders for her lesson.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ asked Miss Terry in a stern voice.

Bertha looked very frightened, and gave no answer.

‘Who taught you to write your figures on your nails?’

You wicked, deceitful little girl, I am perfectly shocked at you. I shall inform Mrs. Toogood of your conduct.'

'Howard does it then, I can tell you,' said Bertha sulkily. 'You had better tell of her too.'

Miss Terry appeared not to hear, but her colour changed.

'I tell you Howard writes her lessons on her nails,' repeated Bertha. 'It is not fair to tell of me and not of her; and, of course, you won't tell of Howard.'

Bertha spoke so loud this time that it would have been useless any longer to pretend not to hear her; so Miss Terry remarked—

'You are a very impudent little girl, and I shall certainly tell Mrs. Toogood of you.'

'Then I shall tell, too,' exclaimed Bertha. 'I won't be told of, when others do worse. You daren't tell of Howard.'

The child stood defiantly, with her face crimson, and the tears starting in her eyes.

By this time the attention of everybody in the room was attracted, and Isabel Howard was standing close to Miss Terry.

'What do you mean, Bertha?' she asked impudently, flashing her eyes at the other girls. 'Why does not Miss Terry dare tell of me?'

'My dear Miss Howard,' commenced Miss Terry, as if to stop her; but Bertha quickly answered the question.

'Everybody knows she doesn't, because you have lots of money and can give presents, and because,' said

Bertha, bursting with indignation,—‘because she is a toady.’

Some of the girls tittered ; and Bertha resumed, ‘You know she is, Howard ; you know you said she was yourself.’

It was now Isabel’s turn to look uncomfortable ; but she attempted to get out of the difficulty at once by an untruth.

‘I never said anything of the sort, you horrid little story-teller !’

‘Indeed I should be greatly surprised and grieved if I thought that you, Miss Howard, could have said such a thing,’ said Miss Terry, taking out her pocket-handkerchief and placing it to her eyes.

‘Of course I never said it ; is it likely?’ said Miss Howard.

‘Bertha, you are a very wicked little girl,’ said Miss Terry.

‘Well,’ said Bertha, crying violently, ‘Howard may choose to go and tell stories, but she did for all that ; and she is not the only one neither who thinks you are a toady. I know all the girls do ; I have heard them say it again and again ; and even Miss Astley, who is only just come, thinks so too.’

‘Hold your tongue, Bertha,’ said Miss Terry. ‘I dare-say these statements of yours are as false as the rest ; and as to Miss Astley,’ continued she, looking in the direction of Theodora, ‘such a remark coming from her to so small a child, only shows her utter disregard to her duty and respect to her superiors.’

It occurred to Theodora, that as Miss Terry professed to treat the rest of Bertha's statements as inventions, she might also have given the accusation against herself the benefit of a doubt; but she kept silence, not choosing to bring the child into further trouble by denying having said such a thing, which she was conscious of thinking, and, in her proud independence, not caring much whether Miss Terry approved of her or no.

On that same evening, when school was over, Miss Howard being as usual the centre of attraction, Theodora was surprised to hear the occurrence of the evening spoken of as rather an amusing incident.

‘Fancy that little telltale, Bertha Lloyd, going and saying that you had called Terry a toady!’ observed, as a beginning, a girl of fifteen, named Harriet Jackson.

‘Yes, I was obliged to tell a cram, you know,’ answered Isabel Howard, laughing, ‘although I don’t believe that Terry half believed me after all. I must give her that ivory card-case of mine; that will appease her.’

‘It was awkward, and I expected every minute the child would accuse some others of us by name,’ said Lucy Watson. ‘I think you came out of it splendidly.’

Theodora looked quickly at the speaker, who, seeing the look, said—

‘Well, what have you to say?’

‘I was astonished at what you said,’ said Theodora. ‘You seem to forget that poor little Bertha, who simply told the truth, has been punished by being sent to bed without tea; whereas it is Miss Howard who—’

‘Who ought to have been sent to bed without tea, I suppose you mean to say,’ interrupted Isabel.

‘Of course, if the right person were punished,’ said Theodora.

Isabel Howard coloured crimson. Her conscience told her that Theodora was right. At the same moment rose on all sides a noise of voices.

‘Oh yes, very likely. Fancy sending a grown-up girl to bed without tea!’

‘Fancy acknowledging to Terry that she had called her a toady! I think Howard behaved very well.’

‘Just as she always does,’ chimed in Lucy Watson. ‘Bertha Lloyd is a little nasty telltale. I hate a telltale.’

‘So do I. You’d never find Howard tell tales of others to save herself.’

‘No, she has too much honour,’ said Lucy Watson. ‘Bertha is a little sneak.’

‘I don’t think she is,’ said Theodora; ‘she is the sneak who allows Bertha to be punished for her fault, and because she has not courage to tell the truth.’

‘I am a sneak, am I?’ screamed Isabel Howard. ‘Dare to say that again!’

She turned white with rage, as she advanced towards Theodora.

‘It is the word which one of your own friends supplied. I put it to your own sense of justice, is Bertha the one who deserves the name?’

‘I don’t care who deserves the name. You shan’t call me a sneak,’ retorted Isabel in the same tone.

‘You have called yourself one by admitting that you told a lie, and allowed Bertha to be punished unjustly.’

‘I won’t stand it,’ raved Isabel, ‘to be called such a name, and by a pupil-teacher too.’

‘No, that I wouldn’t,’ said one of her friends.

‘I’d *make* her retract it,’ said another.

‘Trumpery thing!’ exclaimed Lucy Watson.

Had these girls been boys, at this juncture there would probably have been a fight; but as fighting was out of the question, hysterics was considered the next most appropriate thing. So Isabel Howard went into hysterics.

All the girls immediately flew to her assistance,—one recommended one thing, one another, some were for flying for Mrs. Toogood and alarming the house; but Isabel herself recovered sufficiently to forbid this, and then relapsed.

Theodora stood looking on, receiving in silence the remarks and invectives of the girls, who looked upon her as the cause of all the turmoil; although, as they really enjoyed the unusual scene, they ought to have been much obliged to her. Then, when Isabel was sufficiently recovered to rise, she cast upon Theodora what she intended to be a look of ineffable scorn, and pranced from the room, accompanied by the whole flock of her satellites. Theodora sat down to her stocking-darning, and began to think over what had passed, and to wonder whether she had acted rightly in what she had said; while her reflections were interrupted by the whispering remarks of the younger children, who had been too much surprised at what was passing to say anything at the time.

Theodora could not help thinking of poor little Bertha, who had cried so bitterly when sent to bed, and whose offence had been only casually mentioned to Mrs. Toogood, without any inquiries on her part. She was wishing that she might leave the schoolroom that she might visit her, but that was against the regulations. Until prayers, and then bed-time, Theodora's place was with the younger girls and with the stockings.

The names of the girls were called over as usual before prayers, and none appeared missing excepting little Bertha Lloyd. Then Mrs. Toogood received the good-nights of all the pupils and of Miss Terry, and left the room. After this the girls dispersed to their own rooms. It was Theodora's duty to go round the last thing, and see that all were in bed, and the lights out. She made a point of going at once to Bertha's room. None of the other children had yet come up-stairs; yet just as Theodora was about to open Bertha's door, the handle was turned from within, and a girl came out. She was without a light, and she started and turned pale as she saw Theodora.

'Have you been to see poor little Bertha?' Theodora asked.

The girl looked right and left, as if she hardly knew whether to answer or no; then, as Theodora added, 'It was very kind of you,' she said—

'Don't tell anybody about it; I saved her a piece of bread and butter at tea-time.'



## CHAPTER XIII.

Theodora hears strange things—Letters from home—Miss Terry misrepresents Theodora—Dull school routine—Theodora makes a friend—Vision of her father's gravestone.

'OME in here,' said Theodora, opening the door of her own bedroom, which as yet was vacant, for the girls always made as many delays as they could in coming up-stairs. 'It was very kind of you to save your bread and butter. I did not know it was allowed.'

'I don't suppose it is,' said the girl, whose name was Letitia or Letty Jones. 'I daresay I should have caught it had I been found out. But I think it is such a shame that Howard should get off as she does, and poor little Bertha be punished for saying what was nothing but the truth.'

'I suppose, though, she was punished for writing her lesson on her finger-nails.'

'Then we ought all of us to be punished alike, for it is what everybody does. Bertha only followed the example of those older than herself,' said Letitia.

‘It is very shabby and mean,’ said Theodora.

‘So it is ; but everything is shabby and mean here. Was not that shabby—that story that Howard told to get out of a scrape ? I know she has called Miss Terry a toady—I have heard her do it again and again, and imitate her “hm-m-m-m” when she speaks to Mrs. Toogood.’

‘Then why did not you say so?’ asked Theodora. ‘You ought to have backed poor little Bertha when Miss Howard contradicted her, if you had heard her say so.’

‘Why, all the girls have heard her, times and times,’ said Letitia Jones. ‘What would have been the good of, as you say, backing Bertha ? I should only have made Howard venomous against me.’

‘I think it is our duty to stand up for the truth, whoever is against us,’ said Theodora. ‘I cannot understand the way you go on here, Letitia. I won’t call you “Jones,” as the others do. I do so dislike that plan of calling girls by their surnames, as if they were men.’

‘Yes ; isn’t it horrid?’ said Letitia. Then, after a pause, she said, ‘You will find it is of no use going against Isabel Howard. If you make her your enemy, your life will be very uncomfortable.’

‘I don’t want to make her my enemy,’ said Theodora ; ‘but I must speak when I see such horrid things done as were done to-day. I should despise myself if I did not. I wonder you did not speak out to-day.’

‘Well,’ said Letitia, ‘the fact is, I don’t like. You see, Isabel Howard has lots of money, and—’

At that moment there was a noise of many feet approaching, and Theodora had only time to say—

‘How did you manage to get to Bertha’s room so directly after prayers? You answered to your name.’

‘No, I didn’t,’ Letitia answered; ‘I got Lucy Watson to answer for me. I knew I should not be missed.’

There was no time for any further remark; but the whole system carried on struck Theodora as very wrong and deceitful. It was so unlike anything she had ever dreamt of, that she hardly knew how to think of it. But the chattering of the girls, six in number, who had entered, and who occupied the same room as herself, put an end to her reflections.

All of them, whether they had taken an active part or no in the cause of Isabel Howard, seemed opposed to Theodora,—some, because they preferred the bold, unprincipled conduct of Isabel, and others, as Theodora believed, because they were afraid of going against her, and asserting their true feelings.

She tried to shut her ears to the hints and insinuations against herself—tried to resolve in her own mind what she ought to do, but she could not compose herself, or sleep, so long as the chattering continued; and when she did fall asleep, it was with a wearied, confused feeling, from which she woke just as weary and confused in the morning.

The next day there was a letter for her from home, telling of the kindness of friends in interesting themselves about getting Gertrude into the Clerical School, and of how much Alfred liked his new quarters—what pleasant

school companions he had, and how the studies were exactly what he liked, and such as he knew would suit him ; what a good little girl Edie was, and how useful she made herself. The letter finished off with a burst of thankfulness, on the part of Mrs. Astley, that she should have such good children—always excepting Gertrude. ‘ And whatever should happen, dear Theo,’ she concluded, ‘ it will always be a comfort to me to think that some of you are provided for. Alfred must get on ; and you, if you only keep with Mrs. Toogood—which I am convinced you will—will be sure to make your way.’

‘ And I have been complaining in my own mind, and wishing that I could find time to-day to write and tell mamma all that has happened,’ thought Theodora. ‘ It is very selfish of me ; but I will not let her know a word about it. It is not much to have to bear ill-natured remarks for those I love. At any rate, Mrs. Toogood cannot think I have done anything wrong ; for of course Miss Terry will not have repeated anything of what Bertha said.’

But Miss Terry had informed Mrs. Toogood that Miss Astley had incited Bertha Lloyd to impertinence and insubordination, and to saying things which Miss Terry had rather not repeat ; and Miss Terry had accompanied the information with a great many shakes of the head, and shivers and sighs ; so that Mrs. Toogood had requested her, for the future, to see that Miss Astley was not too much alone with the younger children,—a request which Miss Terry from that day took care to put in force ; openly, and before the children, warning Theodora

against infusing rebellion into their young minds, until most of the little girls began to look upon Theodora as a dangerous person, and, with the weakness of children, thought to please Miss Terry by being rude and unkind in their manner to her.

Theodora's position was a very unpleasant one. She was treated with injustice by her superiors, cut by most of the other girls, and paid but little regard by the children. Again and again she felt as if she must throw it all up, and tell her mother how she was situated. Small as her troubles may seem to those who read of them, they appeared to her more than she could bear. Her life went on in a dull routine of duties, which had lost their interest because she was alone, and everybody seemed so unkind to her.

It was now that she remembered the words of her brother Alfred, and found in her hour of friendlessness that there is a truer than any earthly friend.

There was one girl, however, who occasionally took notice of Theodora; but that was only when she dared—when she was unobserved by the others, for she was too cowardly to bear a part in the universal contempt expressed for Theodora. This was Letitia Jones. Perhaps you will think her friendship was hardly worth having, if she dared not openly take the part of her friend; and at a former time Theodora might have thought the same; but she was so lonely, that she accepted any notice with gratitude.

Letitia Jones slept in the same room as Theodora;

and one morning, when the latter woke earlier than usual, she found Letitia sitting up in bed, working her fingers rapidly backwards and forwards with a piece of cotton.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Theodora, after she had watched her for a few moments.

‘Tatting,’ answered Letitia.

‘What is it for? Do you trim your clothes with it?’

‘Better than that,’ said Letitia. ‘Now, Astley, I know you won’t tell if I ask you not, because you are too religious not to keep your word.’

So, even in Mrs. Toogood’s school, Theodora had shown that religion makes a girl honourable.

‘I’ll tell you what I do it for, but you mustn’t repeat.’

‘No,’ said Theodora.

‘Honour bright!’ added Letitia; for being lax in her own sense of honour, she doubted that of her companion.

‘Honour bright, if you wish it,’ said Theodora, laughing. ‘I should have thought “no” sufficient.’

‘What an odd girl you are!’ said Letitia. ‘Well, I’ll tell you what I do it for. I get sixpence a yard for making this tatting.’

‘And what do you want the money for?’ asked Theodora.

‘Well,’ said Letitia Jones,—‘only you must promise most of all not to tell this. You see my papa and mamma are not rich. They are not very poor, you know,’ said Letitia, as if afraid she was losing caste in

her friend's eyes, 'but they can't afford to give much money for dress, and I want to give my mamma a new black silk dress. Now you are laughing at me,' said Letitia quickly.

'Why should I laugh?' asked Theodora. 'I never liked you so much or thought you such a nice girl as I do now, Letitia.'

'The other girls would laugh finely, I can tell you. I wouldn't dare tell any of them that I do this for money. I pretend I do it for trimming my petticoat bodies.'

'I think it is a pity you should pretend anything, Letitia. I would rather tell the truth, or hold my tongue altogether.'

'Well, you know,' said Letty, 'it is all very fine to talk, but it isn't pleasant to be laughed at; and I can't stand being teased. You don't mind it.'

'Do you think I do not? It is just as hard for me as for you; but I would sooner be teased or laughed at to any extent than I would say what is not true.'

'What an odd girl you are!' said Letitia Jones again.

Theodora lay quiet for a little while, then she said—

'Is it difficult, Letitia?'

'Oh dear, no; as easy as anything. You could learn how to do it in five minutes.'

'But could I sell it if I made it?'

'Oh yes; the woman who takes mine will buy any quantity: it's the fashion, you see. Do you want to do it?'

'I would like very much to make some.'

‘What! for money?’

‘Yes, for money.’

‘What do you want the money for?’ asked Letitia Jones. ‘Come, I have told you what I make it for; so you ought to tell me, it is but fair.’

‘Well, as you know, I have no father,’ Theodora answered, ‘and my mother is poorer a great deal than yours. I would like to do anything that would help.’

Theodora did not like to tell Letitia what was already dawning in her mind—it seemed too sacred a subject to be spoken of to a stranger.

‘Well,’ said Letitia, ‘get into bed with me, and I’ll teach you how to do it.’

Theodora complied, and in a quarter of an hour succeeded in learning to tat indifferently well. Then, thanking Letitia for her kindness, she returned to her own bed and thought the subject over. Sixpence a yard would be six shillings a dozen, and three dozen yards would be nearly a sovereign; and, as she counted up, there rose in Theodora’s mind a vision of a white stone cross in the churchyard at Chatterton.

If ever the rather trumpery occupation of tatting was sanctified and raised into a solemn duty, it was now, when it appeared as the means of enabling Theodora to discharge her filial duty. Of course you have read Longfellow’s poems; if you have not, you ought—all girls, and boys too, should be familiar with them. In one of his poems, Longfellow says—

‘Nothing useless is, or low.’

And George Herbert, another poet, who lived a couple of centuries ago, says—

‘Who sweeps a room as to God’s law,  
Makes that, and the action fine.’

Theodora was elevating tatting into a much finer thing than it was intended to be.

Materials she procured from Letitia Jones, who procured them, it was supposed, during the holidays; and the time for work she had to make for herself, by waking some hours in the morning before it was time to rise. This was the hardest part of it all; for Theodora’s duties during the day were calculated to fatigue her a good deal at times, and make her full night’s rest necessary. Thus weeks went on, and weeks grew into months; and the Christmas holiday time was coming; and Theodora, instead of becoming more popular with the girls, found that, without anything in her own conduct to account for it, she was more shunned than ever.



## CHAPTER XIV.

The birthday celebration—Unkind treatment of Theodora—Miss Terry speaks against her to Mrs. Toogood—Theodora's refuge in her sorrow—The girls 'catch her'—Theodora earns a new title.

**T**was a custom at Mrs. Toogood's establishment that once a year there should be a day of general rejoicing. This day was generally during the week of going home. It was the conclusion of lessons for the term; and by the contributions of all the inmates of the house, a grand entertainment was provided for the evening. This day was looked forward to throughout the half-year; for a breaking-up ode had to be written by the elder girls; and it was weary work at times for the young ladies to knock the rhymes out of their heads, and took several half-holidays in the doing.

Half a dozen of the elder girls were allowed to do all the waiting upon this occasion, such as cutting the thousand-and-one slices of bread and butter, and cake-making, and handing round the tea; and being dressed with little white muslin aprons, were, with the mild wit

of school-girls, addressed as 'Betty.' Before Theodora's time, her predecessor Miss Tomkinson, who had been a great favourite with the girls, had always been one of the Betties; and Mrs. Toogood, taking it for granted that the new pupil-teacher would be of the number, placed Theodora's name in the list as one of the six.

When the list was handed to Isabel Howard, she called a conclave of the girls; and addressing them from a form, where she had mounted in order the better to see her congregation, asked them if they were to have 'Astley' amongst the Betties. Everybody of course answered 'no'; and Miss Howard said—

'It is of no use saying anything to Toogood about it.' That was Isabel's respectful way of speaking of her mistress. 'Let Astley come if she chooses; but I for one will not allow her to touch anything at all.'

'Nor I,' said each of the girls.

When the time came for retiring below stairs to begin domestic preparations, the names of the six Betties were told off by Miss Terry; and Theodora hearing her name mentioned, although little expecting it, went with the rest. Little Bertha had informed her of some of the customs of the day, but none of the others had told her anything about it. When they all arrived in the pantry, they found a great number of cakes set out in readiness, and loaves of bread, and pounds of butter; and at once Isabel Howard took the lead in apportioning the work.

'Davis, you make the tea,' said she; 'Carter and

Hawkhurst cut bread and butter ; and Lucy Watson will help me with the cakes.'

Theodora perceived at once that she was to be excluded ; but as she had been bidden by Mrs. Toogood to help, she said—

‘What shall I do? Cannot I cut the cakes also?’

‘No, I thank you, Miss Astley,’ answered Isabel Howard, stiffly ; ‘we can do without your assistance.’

Theodora spoke the feeling of the moment when she said—‘I think you are very unkind indeed. I can’t imagine why you should all behave to me in the way you do.’

‘Then I am afraid your memory must be rather short, Miss Astley. I find you disapprove of our calling each other by our surnames, so I will give you your full title,’ said Isabel Howard.

So even Letitia Jones had turned traitor, and repeated her unguarded words to her disadvantage !

Theodora burst into tears. The next moment she would have given worlds to have recalled such an exhibition of sorrow ; for, as she left the pantry, she heard the cruel tittering and ill-natured remarks which were made upon her.

It was a miserable evening for her. The girls all danced together, but no one asked her to dance ; and she would not ask any, lest she should be refused. But it was lonely work to see all her companions dancing about and amusing themselves, whilst she sat neglected.

When the time arrived for tea and coffee, they were handed round by the self-constituted waiting-maids ; and

then Theodora heard Mrs. Toogood remark to Miss Terry—

‘I thought Miss Astley was one of the waitresses.’

‘Yes,’ said Miss Terry, ‘her name was put down ; but, you see, ’m, the young ladies don’t—hm-m-m.’

‘Do you mean they do not like her?’ asked Mrs. Toogood.

‘Miss Astley is peculiar ; yes ; not very amiable or accommodating perhaps. No,’ said Miss Terry ; ‘and she has not made friends—hm-m-m.’

‘She is not an unamiable-looking young person,’ observed Mrs. Toogood.

‘Appearances are so deceitful, ’m. You, with your great judgment, must be aware of that—so penetrating. Yes—hm-m-m.’

Theodora moved farther away, for she did not wish to hear any more of Miss Terry’s comments upon herself, but she could not avoid some words reaching her ears.

‘Miss Howard, ’m ; oh yes ; a very superior and admirable—hm-m-m. Sweet, amiable gurl, too. No pride ; a great pet of mine.’

Theodora could not help even then thinking how pleased Isabel Howard would be at hearing herself called ‘a great pet’ of Miss Terry’s. Then next she heard from Miss Terry—

‘Very good of you, I’m sure, ’m, to say so—very indulgent—so like you. Well, perhaps she does do her duty by the little ones.’

Theodora would not stay to hear more. She made her

way through the dancers to the door. She would not have heard so much, but that she did not like to disturb them unnecessarily.

She went to her own room, and sat down in the dark. What had she done, she asked herself, to deserve the apparent hatred of the girls? Was that one offence, which had happened at the very commencement of her sojourn at Mrs. Toogood's, sufficient to last for six months? Theodora little knew the system of ill-natured repetition which was carried on in the school. She did not know how everything she did and said was misrepresented to Isabel Howard, as soon as her flatterers found out that it was that young lady's good pleasure to hate Theodora. Why she hated Theodora, Isabel could hardly have explained to herself; for the dislike, which had commenced on the evening after little Bertha's accusation, had grown into a much stronger feeling. I believe the foundation of Isabel's opposition was, that she could not put Theodora down. Had she been able to turn her into a flatterer and follower of herself, as she had her predecessor, Miss Tomkinson, who would do any dirty work at Isabel's bidding, and who, as a reward for her services, was dubbed with the inelegant title of 'Old Tom,' she would have liked her well enough.

It was of little use sitting in the dark and brooding over her discomforts. Theodora had always one Refuge for her aching heart and weary head. She went down upon her knees, and asked God to help her.

Suddenly a loud laugh startled her, and a light flashed

into her room ; and, turning round, she saw three or four girls, headed by Isabel Howard.

‘Haven’t we caught her !’ exclaimed Lucy Watson ; ‘that’s what she came away for, the double-faced hypocrite !’

Why she should be a double-faced hypocrite for going to her room to say her prayers, Lucy Watson herself could not have said ; but her exclamation passed current, and was received with a laugh.

‘Of course she don’t approve of any of our idle goings-on down-stairs,’ said Isabel. ‘She is too good to dance ; too good to laugh—that’s the reason she always looks so long-faced ; too good even to eat cake : I noticed that she refused it.’

‘How witty she is !’ observed Lucy Watson to Anna Carter, aside, alluding of course to Isabel.

‘I am sure I wonder she ever condescends to speak to any of us—although, I am sure, it ain’t often she does. She won’t throw away her wisdom on such trumpery creatures as we are. *Saint Theodora !*’

‘Ha, ha, ha !’ laughed all the girls ; and ‘Saint Theodora !’ was repeated from one to the other, and they all made low curtsies to Theodora, who, too proud to cry again, so as to provoke their laughter, and too much hurt to speak, stood crimson and silent.

‘Come away,’ said Isabel. ‘Look at her now ; how injured and aggrieved she looks ! We shall have a martyr as well as a saint soon.’

The girls went, their shouts of laughter echoing along

the stairs and passages,—for on this day every one was allowed to make as much noise as she liked,—little believing how true were the words that Isabel had spoken, and that, by their cruel set upon Theodora Astley, they were really making her a martyr.





## CHAPTER XV.

Theodora's new trial—Mrs. Staples introduced to notice—Lucy Watson's difficulties—The court of justice—Theodora called upon to act counsel—Lucy is arraigned—Who is this 'Mother Staples'?—Untimely interruption of the court—Theodora learns a very disagreeable fact.

**T**HEODORA was left alone—too glad to be free of the presence of the girls and their unkindness. Isabel Howard and her companions returned to the room where all the rest were assembled, and recommenced dancing.

She was certainly a strikingly handsome girl; and if she was not aware of the fact, it was not for want of hearing Miss Terry say so. Isabel seldom came near the spot where Miss Terry was standing with Mrs. Toogood, but she overheard part of a remark upon herself.

Refreshments came after the dancing, and then the prizes were given away. As was invariably the case, Isabel Howard obtained several of them, and, amongst others, that for decorous and honourable behaviour. Theodora could have laughed when, the next morning,

she heard how the prizes had been awarded, but she made no remark aloud. She had learnt so much of worldly wisdom since she had been at Prospect House, as to make her hold her peace often, when, a few months before, she would have spoken out the feelings of the moment. But all this system of flattering and falsehood she was going to leave behind her for a time in a very few days, as she thought ; and the prospect of turning her back upon Mrs. Toogood's establishment for a few weeks made her feel strong enough for anything.

Theodora had her examination as well as the others before she was dismissed. To her consternation, she found that Miss Terry was to look over all the girls' clothes before sending them home, and Theodora was summoned to assist at the examination. Of course, numbers of things were found in want of repair ; and Theodora had to sit early and late, mending and patching, so as to send the wardrobes home creditably. She discovered before long, that by this means she would not be allowed to go home until the last of the girls who went away for the holidays had left ; and even after that, the wardrobes of those who remained during the vacation with Mrs. Toogood would have to be repaired.

Theodora wrote home, and told her mother that she would not be back for another week. She could have cried with disappointment and vexation as she did so ; but crying was a luxury forbidden to her, because of the curious eyes of the girls. Of course, now there were no more lessons, and every kind of plan for enjoyably passing

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the holidays was made by those who remained during that time at Prospect House. Isabel Howard was amongst the number, her parents being in the West Indies.

Many things fell upon the ears of Theodora as she sat at those eternal stockings—things which had not been spoken of in her presence so freely before ;—firstly from Lucy Watson, who, being from the extreme north of England, and going home only once a year, and that at midsummer, was able to carry on her system of attendance upon Miss Howard uninterruptedly through the Christmas time.

‘I am sure I don’t know whatever I shall do,’ whined Lucy. ‘I owe old Mother Staples now five and sixpence ; and to-day she declared she wouldn’t trust me any longer, and she threatened—the horrid old thing !—that she would tell Mrs. Toogood if I don’t pay this week. I can’t pay ; how can I, when I haven’t the money ?’

‘Well, it’s your own fault,’ said her *friend* Isabel Howard, who was always ready to run her down in her hour of difficulty. ‘You really are such a glutton, Watson, that I believe you care for nothing in the world but your stomach. What did you do with that half-crown I lent you only a week ago on purpose to pay Mother Staples ?’

‘Well, it went in other things,’ said Lucy Watson sulkily.

‘In what things ? Come, confess. Here, let’s have a court of justice,’ cried Isabel Howard. ‘We must get the truth out of this culprit.’

‘I won’t,’ said Lucy.

‘You won’t what? You shall. Hoist her up on that form, and put the fire-guard round her. Now, I’ll be the judge,’ said Isabel Howard; ‘only I must have a wig. Here, Astley, give me some of your stockings to hang over my head.’

Theodora arranged half a dozen over Isabel, pushing her curling brown hair behind her ears. ‘That’s capital,’ said she, glancing at herself in a small glass which hung against the wall, and flushing with conscious prettiness, as she saw how becoming the festoons of white stockings were to her face. ‘Now, where is the judge’s seat?’

Two or three girls had hoisted one form upon another, and in the centre of the upper one they had placed a hassock. The seat was, at any rate, elevated enough. ‘That will do,’ said Isabel. ‘Who are to be the jury? Prisoner, you will be tried by a jury of two of your enlightened countrymen. I am sorry I can’t afford you more than two, because I must have at least one barrister, and I am afraid he will have to conduct both the prosecution and the defence.’

‘That isn’t fair,’ objected Lucy Watson.

‘What are we to do then?’

One of the girls whispered to Isabel, and she answered audibly, ‘I don’t know, if she is not too grand.’ Then raising her voice, she said in an imposing tone: ‘Might we presume to ask that Saint Theodora would condescend to stoop so low as to join in our frivolous amusements, and become for the time counsel for the prisoner?’

Theodora jumped up quickly, saying, 'Of course I will ;' and without a moment's reflection tossed all her mended and unmended stockings from her lap, some of them flying to the other end of the schoolroom as she did so.

'Now, then,' commenced Isabel Howard, in the capacity of judge, and knowing very little about the conduct of a law court,—'Now, then, what is this prisoner charged with ?'

'My Lord,' said Mary Anne Carter, who was dressed, as counsel for the prosecution, appropriately in an old garden cloak, and a huckaback towel twisted round her head,—'My Lord, and gentlemen of the jury, you see before you a most aggravating offender. The prisoner has been assisted again and again by a munificent patron with sums of money, purporting to have for object the defraying of a long standing account with an individual, named commonly "Mother Staples."'

'Who is this "Mother Staples"?' inquired the judge in a pompous tone.

Theodora might have asked the same question, for she had been wondering who she was, whom now she heard spoken of for the first time.

'An individual, my Lord,' said Mary Anne Carter, 'celebrated chiefly for a red nose, and for grasping qualities. A poor but dishonest woman, your Worship.'

'And has not the debt been discharged?' asked the judge.

'No, my Lord ; it has been suggested that the sums of

money have been used in the purchase of various lolly-pops, bulls' eyes, hard bake, and such vanities.'

'Can you state the sums of money which the prisoner has received?' asked Theodora at this juncture.

'No, I cannot,' replied Mary Anne Carter.

'Can you produce the lollypops, bulls' eyes, hard bake, and other vanities in which the money has been spent?'

'No, I cannot; for the prisoner being of a gluttonous disposition, all such articles have been swallowed immediately upon receipt.'

'My Lord,' said Theodora, 'the prisoner is accused of receiving sums of money which cannot be produced, and of swallowing lollypops which are now nowhere to be found. It seems to me a very hard case. Here is a young person placed in a very awkward position, and one which, I am sure, demands the utmost leniency of the bench.'

The judge shook her head slowly from side to side, until one of the stockings fell over her eye.

'Gentlemen of the jury,' said she, 'you have heard on the one side the statement of the counsel for the prosecution; and as you have heard it, I will not trouble myself to repeat it; and on the other, you have had an able defence from our learned brother, which also I will not take the pains to repeat, as I presume you are neither of you deaf. It is your duty to say whether the prisoner is guilty, or not guilty.'

'Guilty, my Lord,' shouted the jury; 'and, please your Worship, your Lordship's wig is tumbling off.'

All laughed aloud, judge, jury, counsels, and prisoner,

when the door opened, and Miss Terry, who had not yet left for her home, entered the schoolroom.

'You are very merry, young ladies,' said she, seeing Isabel Howard perched upon her elevated seat. 'Some pleasant joke? a sort of masquerade? Quite right to enjoy yourselves.' Then catching sight of Theodora amongst the number, she altered her tone, and added: 'Miss Astley! you too! I am surprised at your levity. You seem to forget your duty strangely. Go back at once to your work.'

Theodora had forgotten herself sufficiently for the moment to be quite happy, and at her ease with the other girls. She pulled the imitation wig and gown from her and returned to her seat. But all her stockings were scattered about, and several of them still hanging about the head of Isabel. Miss Terry, with dignified displeasure, left the room. No sooner was she gone than Isabel Howard said—

'Let's go on now. What did that old thing come for? Only to spy, I believe. The prisoner is condemned; now she must be hanged. Come on, Miss Astley.'

'I had better not,' said Theodora. 'Miss Terry said I was to go on with my stockings.'

'Well, never mind if she did; you are not afraid of her, I suppose?'

'No, I am not afraid of her,' Theodora answered; 'but it would not be right to go on playing after she has told me I am to leave off. Mrs. Toogood said that I was to obey Miss Terry, you know.'

All the girls shouted with laughter, and Isabel Howard said—

‘I never in all my life knew such a ridiculous creature. Your name ought to be Toogood, I’m sure. I did think, from the way that you entered into our game, that there was some fun in you; but it is of no use. Well, go back to your stockings if you like them better; but don’t say that I have not done my best in trying to make things pleasant before you go.’

‘I know you mean very kindly,’ said Theodora; ‘but you don’t understand that I have a certain duty to perform.’

‘I am neither an idiot, Miss Astley, thank you,’ said Isabel, ‘nor do I want to be taught my duty by you.’

Lucy Watson here applauded, but was cut short by Isabel.

‘Prisoner, hold your tongue! Remember that unless you give an account of that money which you have received, or at once deliver up the lollypops, which you seem to have bought by the hogshead, I shall pass sentence upon you.’

‘Well,’ said Lucy Watson, who could not at all enter into the fun of the play, and who was fast turning sulky, ‘you know as well as I do, that I owed Mother Staples five shillings at the beginning of this half.’

‘And do you mean to say that you have only paid her sixpence the whole of this time?’ asked Mary Anne Carter.

‘I have always been paying her; but then I have had

other things of her ; those books to read run up so fast. And I have had shuttles and crotchet needles, and no end of crotchet cotton ; besides lots of things I can't remember.'

'And so, whenever you have come to me to borrow money to pay Staples, it has been only an excuse ; and you have eaten the money instead, in the shape of lollypops ?'

'I have paid her several times,' said Lucy Watson.

'Watson,' said Isabel Howard, 'you are a sneak ! I believe you have been told so by me a great many times. I shall not lend you nor give you any more money. You are a disgusting sneak and glutton.'

Lucy Watson began to whimper.

'I am sure,' said she, 'that I have always done all you wished me to, Howard.'

'So you have,' answered Isabel, 'partly because you like that sort of thing, and partly because you did not dare do otherwise. Well, in consideration that you have told a good many crams to oblige me, and I know are ready to tell more, I will let you have the money once more ; or, rather, I will pay Mother Staples myself ; for it would be a very awkward thing for all of us if she told Mrs. Toogood about it.'

'Oh, thank you, thank you,' whined Lucy Watson.

Theodora had listened in amazement to all these revelations, so entirely new to her. She was staring in such complete wonder, that Isabel Howard noticed it, and said—

‘Well, Mrs. Roundeyes, did you never guess where all your tatting cotton comes from?’

‘Letitia Jones told me that she bought it at home during the holidays,’ said Theodora.

Then everybody laughed aloud.





## CHAPTER XVI.

A happy time at home—Alfred's high spirits—His schoolfellows' interest in the Duke of X— Alfred's description of him—The 'ideal and the real—The kindness of the Duke of X— to Alfred.

**A**T length Theodora was home again, leaving behind her Prospect House, and all the stocking-mending and other disagreeables of her situation. It was not until she was once more at Chatterton, and was surrounded on all sides by the kind attentions of friends and acquaintances, and bowed and curtsied to by all the villagers, that she quite realized the difference of her position, as what Isabel Howard had called an 'under scrub.' She seemed to have two distinct lives; and she was only too glad to try and forget as soon as possible, if but for a time, her life at Mrs. Too-good's establishment.

Alfred was home for his holidays also. He had nothing to tell of his school, his studies, and companions, but what was pleasant. Theodora felt perfectly happy; and in the outburst of her affection and confidence, she felt

inclined to tell forth various particulars of her late experience. But she had judgment to check herself, and it was well she did ; for there is nothing more difficult than to tell half, or a part, of what cannot all be told. So Mrs. Astley imagined, from Theodora's reticence, that all things went on smoothly at Prospect House.

' You look thin, though, my child,' said she. ' I fear you are kept to the house too much.'

' No, indeed. I walk out nearly every day with the rest, mamma ; indeed, I have sometimes to go alone with the younger girls.'

' What an important person ! ' said Mrs. Astley.

' Oh, by-the-bye, Theo,' said Alfred, ' one of our fellows has a sister who is going to Mrs. Toogood's. I suppose she will go after these holidays. No end of a fellow ! '

' Who—the sister ? ' asked Theodora.

' No, of course, the brother. He is my great chum at school.'

' What is his name ? '

' Leigh. A first-rate fellow he is. I hope we shall go up for our "exam" at the same time. You can have no idea, Theo, what a fellow he is. I only wish you knew him.'

' Is his sister as first-rate as himself ? ' asked Theodora.

' Oh, of course, she is ; indeed, Leigh says she is. She is—'

' No end of a fellow,' suggested Theodora.

' Well, you know what I mean ; and I have no doubt she is capital. So you and she must be friends, Theo, as Leigh is my friend, you see.'

‘Yes,’ said Theodora, thinking there was very little probability of any such friendship coming to pass at Prospect House.

‘I say, mother,’ said Alfred presently, ‘is the old Duke really my godfather?’

‘Did he tell you that he is?’ asked Mrs. Astley; and when Alfred answered yes, she added, ‘I am glad he has remembered it. Your dear father supposed that he had forgotten that he ever stood sponsor to you; and neither he nor I would have reminded Lord Barrington of the fact.’

‘Well, you know, I didn’t believe it when he said so; I thought he was chaffing; and I told him I should ask you.’

‘He must have thought you rude, I am afraid, my dear,’ said Mrs. Astley.

‘Oh, Theo,’ resumed Alfred, turning to his sister, ‘you would have laughed had you been there when first Mr. Westley—that’s one of the masters—mentioned the Duke’s name as my friend before the boys. Some of them were so rich!—not all of course. They came round me full’ of questions. Did I really know the Duke of X?—? Had I actually spoken to him? What was he like? How did he speak? How does he dress? Is he immensely tall?’

‘When you have quite finished your questions I’ll begin to answer them,’ I said. ‘Yes; he is immensely tall—about seven feet high, I should think; but that is nothing for a duke. His voice is like the roaring of thunder. He never

smiles, but knits his brows and contradicts everybody who speaks. He carries such lots of money in all his pockets that they are continually bursting, and letting it tumble out. And, of course, he dresses as all dukes dress.

“How is that?” asked Jones, a fellow who never knows how to sit or stand, or do anything comfortably.

“Why, in his robes of course,” I said. “Do you mean to say *you* have never seen a duke?”

‘For shame, Alfred,’ said his mother.

‘Wait a bit,’ Alfred went on. ‘About a week after this I got a note from the Duke, saying that he was coming to Southsea ; and the very same day he came, and called for me to go out with him. He asked me if I would like to take one of my friends with me, and I said yes, and Leigh came. Well, Jones and the others were wild to see the Duke. They would have done anything to get a sight of him ; but they did not dare make their way into the drawing-room. As we went out of the hall door, there were the boys hanging over the banisters like clothes hung out to dry ; but the first person who went out of the drawing-room was the master, and as soon as he appeared, the boys all shot back into the schoolroom. I believe you know, the under masters were there too ; and nobody got a sight of the Duke after all.’

‘I am glad they did not,’ said Theodora, laughing. ‘It served them right.’

‘Wait a bit,’ said Alfred again. ‘The old Duke took us into Portsmouth, and gave us a blow-out at the fruiterer’s, Riley’s ; and then, as we were going across the common, I

saw the whole lot of them coming towards us. "Here are our fellows, I declare," said I, nudging Leigh, and we both of us burst out laughing ; so that the Duke said—

"What is it? What's the joke, boys?"

'I was obliged to tell him, for he stopped short to hear ; and just as I had finished, the boys came up ; and the Duke shouted out loud with laughter, and then he gave me such a slap on the back as made me jump. I could not help laughing myself when I saw him so jolly, and dressed as much like a farmer as anything else. And there was Jones so beside himself with surprise that he stood still, gaping with his mouth open, so that all the rest passed him, and Mr. Westley had to prod him on with his stick before he had sense enough to move. I have never heard the end of that,' concluded Alfred. 'Jones was in an awful wax about it ; and the Duke is always at me for the description I gave of him.'

'It is a great thing for you, I am sure, my dear, that the Duke of X—— is so kind to you ; it will be the making of you, Alfred ; and you ought to be very grateful.'

Alfred thought for a few minutes ; then he said—

'Yes, he is certainly very kind, and I like him very much ; but I wish he was not a duke, mother. That is the bore of it ; the boys are always making such a fuss, asking me what he says, and what he does, as if I could remember. He told me one day that I was called George after him.'

'So you were.'

'I had almost forgotten that my name was George ;

but one of the masters asked me what the initial G. was for, and I said George ; and then he asked, who was I named after ? I said the Duke of X——. Then they all began exclaiming that I ought to be called by the name. It was funny, that when the Duke told me he is my godfather, he asked why I did not call myself George.'

'What did you tell him ?' asked Mrs. Astley.

'I said I preferred my first name because my father had always called me by it ; and he gave me one of his tremendous slaps on the back, and one of his shouts of laughter, and said, "That's right, my fine fellow ! Stick to your father's wishes before those of half a dozen other people, even though they may chance to be dukes, seven feet high, Albert."

"Saving your presence, my name is Alfred, sir," I said.'

'He always *will* call you wrong, Alf,' said Theodora.

'He does not forget your name, though, Theo. He said to me the last time I saw him, "Give my love to Theodora when you see her."

Mrs. Astley, as she listened to her children talking, could not but be grateful for the brighter prospects which seemed opening before them all. Of Theodora's difficulties she knew nothing, she only heard of what was pleasant. By the kind interest of the Duke of X——, she seemed relieved of all anxiety about her eldest son ; and she knew well how very important to Alfred was that high position of his godfather, of which the boy thought so little. Bob was going on satisfactorily. Gertrude was Mrs. Astley's only grief. She had, since her

father's death, been nothing else but an anxiety and grief to her mother; being very seldom at home, caring for nothing but her own selfish amusement, and entirely beyond control. But with regard to Gertrude even, the distress was soon coming to an end. She had been canvassed for successfully; and after this Christmas time was over, she would take her place at the college for clergymen's daughters at Brighton. Gertrude had brightened up at the prospect of so soon going to such a gay place, and was, when at home, full of foolish talk of the things which she would do.

It was with a happy consciousness that Theodora now looked at her father's grave, for she had the knowledge that she was daily increasing her store towards placing a tombstone to his memory.





## CHAPTER XVII.

Theodora returns to her duties, and is received with enthusiasm—A new arrival—Florence Leigh, the Baronet's daughter—Isabel's resolution—Her plans—Love at first sight.

**H**E Christmas holidays, shortened by the week which had been borrowed from them for stocking-darning, went only too fast; but the rest and the happiness of home, and the time for settling her thoughts into their proper places, did Theodora so much good, that she felt as if she could make head against any troubles that she might have to encounter on her return to Mrs. Toogood's.

She was the first of those to return; having to be there ready to receive the pupils as they arrived. Theodora had hoped that the interval of the holidays would have made Isabel Howard and her party forget the unkind feelings and differences which had been; but she was mistaken. On the first moment of her entrance into the school-room, she was greeted with the old name of scorn.

‘Saint Theodora! Hurrah! here comes the saint.’

It was like going back into a hornet's nest; and Theo-

dora felt very much disposed to answer them back again, but she took the wise course and was silent.

The girls dropped in gradually, one and two at a time ; and before the end of the week, most of them were there. Each one, as she joined the rest, seemed to have brought with her regrets for the renewed delights of home ; and it was some little while before the old terms of intimacy between companions were renewed.

Theodora could not help thinking that Letitia Jones was strange and uncomfortable in her manner when she came ; but the next moment after she had thought it, she blamed herself as very uncharitable, and tried to think that it was her own fancy. But Letitia certainly did try to look both ways at once.

The girls had been told of the expected arrival of Miss Leigh, and Theodora was made acquainted with their various sentiments in the prospect. Lucy Watson, who was at least consistent in her flattery of Isabel, seemed only half pleased at the idea of a possible rival to her leader.

‘She’ll be trying to set herself up over us all,’ said she. ‘I won’t give in to her for one.’

‘I don’t see why *she* should try to take the lead here,’ exclaimed Isabel Howard, angrily. ‘She won’t get it, however she may try, and that I can tell her.’

‘Of course she won’t get it,’ said Sarah Hawkhurst. ‘But she is a baronet’s daughter, you know.’

‘Of course I know that,’ said Isabel Howard, flushing again.

'I daresay her papa has not so much money as your papa, though he is a baronet,' suggested Lucy Watson, the vulgar-minded.

'No, I should think he has not,' replied Isabel Howard, in the same spirit. 'My papa has lots and lots of money.'

At this moment Theodora remembered what Alfred had said of the Duke of X—— carrying so much money about with him that his pockets burst, and the money kept tumbling out, and she gave a sudden laugh.

Isabel Howard turned upon her.

'I should like to know what you are laughing about, Astley?' asked she.

'Something I thought of, which does not concern anybody but myself,' said Theodora.

'You were laughing at me—I am sure you were,' said Isabel.

'I know she was; it is just like her,' chimed in Lucy Watson.

'You don't know anything about it,' returned Theodora; 'nor anything about me. I shall not tell any one of you what I was laughing for.'

'You had better go on with your tatting,' sneered Isabel; 'you'll find it more useful than chattering. You'll be wanting it, maybe.'

Theodora looked up in surprise, for she wondered how the girls could have guessed for what she made the tatting, as she had not mentioned her purpose to any one. She flushed at the same time, half expecting that some

allusion might be made to her dead father ; but they were evidently upon a wrong tack.

‘Your mother may be wanting a new flannel petticoat, perhaps, this chilly weather, poor thing !’ said Mary Anne Carter.

This was received with a perfect burst of applause ; and Sarah Hawkhurst endeavoured to outdo such intense wit.

‘Or it may go towards paying the rent. Sixpence a yard soon mounts up.’

Theodora was annoyed with herself for being annoyed. She wished that she had been given a complexion which did not change with every passing feeling. She wanted to speak, but could not trust her voice, for she knew that it would tremble, and that would be a triumph to these cruel girls ; and her hesitation gave them time for the further exercise of their supposed wit.

‘Lor ! my dear,’ said Isabel Howard as a climax, ‘people don’t pay rent in an almshouse ; it’s all free, gratis, and for nothing, out of the charity of the benevolent public.’

‘An almshouse !’ laughed Mary Anne Carter. ‘I did not know it was quite as bad as that. Well, I don’t think Mrs. Toogood could have known it, or she would hardly have subjected us to such company.’

By this time Theodora had swallowed down her indignation sufficiently to speak, and she said—

‘Whoever informed you of the reason I make tatting told you wrongly, for I have not said to any one living for what purpose I do it ; although you are right in sup-

posing that everything I could do would be a help to my family, and if it were only to the extent of sixpence, I would do it for their help. I am not ashamed of our being poor. If it were true—which it is not—that my mother lived in an almshouse, I should not, I hope, be ashamed of it. There is nothing to be ashamed of in being poor.'

'Hear, hear!' said Mary Anne Carter.

'Noble-minded creature!' said Sarah Hawkhurst.

'But,' added Theodora, 'there is great shame, to my way of thinking, in insulting others for their poverty, and great meanness in joining together, half a dozen against one.'

What Theodora said was quite true; but she had better have left that latter part unsaid. There is nothing more difficult than to say just enough.

Isabel Howard again was convicted by her own conscience that Theodora was right and she was wrong, and she began to hate her worse than ever.

When once a person of bad disposition begins to hate, however unfounded the hatred may be, it takes a very short time for the feeling to grow in intensity until it swallows up the judgment, and throws a false colour over every word and action of the one who is disliked. Isabel Howard found plenty to support her in her antipathy to Theodora, until it became the fashion—everything at school goes by fashion—to abuse Theodora Astley, and misconstrue all she did.

You see that Theodora had been placed by One, who

knew her better than she knew herself, in the very position of all others likely to destroy her natural self-sufficiency.

‘I intend to be immense friends with her,’ proclaimed Isabel Howard.

The person of whom she spoke was Miss Leigh, who was at that moment in the drawing-room with Mrs. Too-good, having, with her father, just arrived at Prospect House. Isabel’s sentiments had lately undergone a change with regard to Miss Leigh. She had thought the subject over, and concluded that the only safe plan, in order to maintain her own supremacy in the school, would be to be herself chief friend with the newcomer, and so at once disarm all rivalry. It was a very clever determination on the part of Isabel, if she could manage to carry it out.

‘Now do you hear, girls, all of you?’ repeated she. ‘Miss Leigh is to be my friend, and I’ll have no interference with her.’

‘All right!’ said several of her hearers; and Lucy Watson murmured, ‘It is a great shame of you, Howard! What is to become of me?’

‘You!’ said Isabel, with contempt in her voice, which she took no pains to conceal. ‘My friendship with Miss Leigh won’t interfere with you: you needn’t be afraid.’

‘You won’t notice me then?’ whined Lucy.

‘Oh yes, I shall,’ answered Isabel grandly. ‘Of course I shall. Don’t be an idiot, Watson.’

So Lucy had to content herself with the prospect of being 'noticed' when Isabel had nothing better to do; and presently was further reassured by being told to mend Isabel's gloves for her; to which task she set herself resignedly.

There was a commotion without, and every one knew that the newcomer was going to be introduced. All eyes were turned to the door. It was a half-holiday, and the whole afternoon had been hitherto spent in idle chatter about Miss Leigh.

At length the various surmises about her were put a stop to by her entrance. She was a tall, fair-haired girl, slighter than Isabel Howard, and a complete contrast to her in appearance. Isabel felt relieved at first sight of her. She had expected a dark-eyed, bright-cheeked girl like herself, who would provoke comparisons between them; but here there was no possibility of comparison. Miss Leigh was graceful and refined, not brilliant and striking like Isabel.

'Young ladies,' said Mrs. Toogood, in the accepted form, 'I have the pleasure of introducing to you a new companion. I trust you will do all in your power to make her stay amongst us pleasant. Miss Leigh,' said she, turning to the newcomer, 'you will find, I hope, some of these young ladies,—indeed, I hope I may say all of them,—most amiable companions. I will now leave you to make acquaintance with each other. Miss Howard,' and Isabel stepped forward, 'will you pay attention to Miss Leigh?'

Mrs. Toogood smiled at the girls, and left the room. Theodora could not help thinking of the time when she had first stood amongst them as a stranger, and wondering whether Miss Leigh felt as uncomfortable as she had then. But, at any rate, Miss Leigh did not look uncomfortable.

‘Is this the schoolroom?’ asked she, looking round. ‘I have never been at any sort of school before, and I am very ignorant of anything connected with it. What a dull room! Where does Mrs. Toogood sit?’

‘There, at that table,’ answered Isabel, pointing to a corner near the fire-place; ‘and Terry sits up at that desk.’

‘Who is Terry?’ asked the stranger quickly.

‘The second one. Head teacher, I suppose she is called, or calls herself.’

‘I should have thought you were speaking of some man,’ observed Miss Leigh quietly. ‘Are you allowed to call her by her surname only?’

Isabel laughed.

‘And that other desk, out there?’

‘Oh, that is Astley’s, or, I suppose you would wish me to say “Miss” Astley.’

‘Yes; I think it would sound much better,’ answered Miss Leigh.

She thought, as she spoke, whether a time would come when she should be spoken of as ‘Leigh,’ and she determined to put a stop to it from the beginning.

Several of the girls behind were tittering at the snub

which their 'friend' Miss Howard had received. Isabel's quick ears heard them, and she coloured with vexation.

'Who is that?' asked Miss Leigh presently, in a low tone of voice, and looking towards Theodora, whose eyes were again upon her work.

'That is—' began Isabel in her usual tone.

'Hush,' said the other; so that she was obliged to lower her voice; but Theodora could catch her own name, and some remark followed, which was accompanied by a laugh from Isabel.

Presently Miss Howard's voice: 'Come and sit down with me over here, and I'll tell you all about everybody, quietly by ourselves.' And then the answer: 'Thank you; but I always prefer finding out all about everybody for myself, and I must make friends over here.'

The next moment Theodora felt a hand laid gently upon hers, and Miss Leigh's voice was saying,

'I guessed who you must be, before I asked your name. I was told before I came, by my brother Fred, that I was to be sure and make friends with his friend's sister; and as I always obey everything Fred tells me, I want to have a talk with you, Theodora Astley.'

Theodora looked into the stranger's face with surprise—too much surprise to allow her to speak. She had never expected that Miss Leigh would even notice her. She thought, if she had thought at all about it, that she would treat her as the other girls treated her, and join with them in making her subordinate position more painful than it was.

Meanwhile there rose a murmur from some of the other girls, of surprise and discontent ; and such remarks as 'She cannot know she is nothing but an under teacher,' reached the ears of Theodora ; and the thought that Miss Leigh could not know came across her mind.

'Will not you shake hands with me?' asked Miss Leigh, still holding out her own ; and Theodora's eyes filled fuller and fuller with tears, until, starting up from the school locker where she had been seated, she rushed from the room.

'Just like her,' exclaimed Mary Anne Carter ; and she was about to continue her comments upon the conduct of Theodora, when, to her surprise, Miss Leigh left the schoolroom also. She had not lost sight of Theodora ; and as the latter reached the bedroom, she turned and found the stranger close behind her.

'What have I done?' said she ; 'why will not you give me your hand? Have I said anything to offend or hurt you? What was it made you cry?' She sat down on the edge of one of the beds, and drew Theodora down by her side. 'Now, tell me, what is it?'

She looked so pretty as she fixed her blue eyes on Theodora, that with the sudden love that often one girl will take to another slightly older than herself, Theodora threw her arms round her neck. The other clasped her hands about her waist, and repeated, 'Now, what was it? what made you cry, you little goose?'

'Because,' said Theodora, in a burst of confidence, 'you spoke so kindly to me, and no one does so here.'

You don't know what it is, Miss Leigh, to be treated always with rudeness and contempt.'

'Do they treat you so? Why do not you tell Mrs. Toogood about it?'

'It would only make matters worse. They would deny it, and my word would go for nothing.'

'What! tell a falsehood about it!' exclaimed Miss Leigh indignantly.

'They do not think much of telling those,' said Theodora sadly.

'Your brother Alfred does not know how they treat you?'

'Of course not; it would make him unhappy, and he might tell my mother,' said Theodora simply.

'And you have told no one?—no one?'

Theodora shook her head.

'Oh, Theodora, what a dear good girl you are! How much better you behave than ever I could in your place! How can you have borne it all in silence for so long?'

'There is always God,' said Theodora, quoting her brother's words.

Her new friend turned and kissed her.

'You will have me now, Theo,—I know they call you "Theo" at home,—at least you can talk of all these things to me.'

'Oh what a happiness it will be!' exclaimed Theodora. 'Oh how kind you are! I don't care how the girls treat me, now that I have a friend.' And the two together returned to the schoolroom.



## CHAPTER XVIII.

Miss Terry's interference in the new friendship—An important half-holiday—A long talk—Isabel stoops to the meanness of listening—Florence's plan of reformation—Her 'pet duty'—Theodora gives grounds for suspicion.

**N**OW may be sure there was a great deal of whispering over this new state of things. Anybody could see from the first that the newcomer intended not only to treat Theodora Astley as an equal, but to make of her a friend. If the girls saw it, Miss Terry saw it also; and being, although a grown woman, as prejudiced against Theodora as any of them, being unable to forget the repetition of little Bertha Lloyd, she was made angry by the conduct of Miss Leigh. She took occasion to say to her—

'I had hoped that you would have found companions of your own station, and in every way suitable to you, Miss Leigh, amongst the young ladies of this house; and such as your papa, Sir Henry, would approve of.'

'I have, thank you, ma'am,' answered the girl,—'I have chosen my companion, and find her every way suited to me.'

‘Miss Howard?’ asked Miss Terry, knowing well that it was not Miss Howard of whom Florence Leigh spoke.

‘No, ma’am,’ she answered; ‘Miss Astley. I do not think that my father would at all approve of Miss Howard as a friend for me.’

‘Miss Howard is a very talented young lady; and her papa is a gentleman of large fortune.’

‘Miss Howard appears to me a very artful young lady,’ said Florence Leigh.

‘Really, Miss Leigh, I feel quite shocked at your saying such a thing of one of your companions; I really cannot hear any more,’ said Miss Terry, pretending to run away with her fingers in her ears.

Her companion looked after her.

‘I cannot understand it,’ said she to herself. ‘Why should she persist in shutting her eyes to the character of that girl? She must know.’ Then she said aloud, ‘I am so glad I shall not be here long.’

‘What! you are not going away again, are you,’ asked Theodora, ‘when you have only just come to make me so happy? You are not in earnest, Florence?’

‘Florence!’ repeated Sarah Hawkurst. ‘Astley has actually the cheek to call Leigh by her Christian name! What next?’ But neither of the friends took any notice of the impertinence.

‘I came only for a twelvemonth, you know, Theo,’ Florence Leigh answered; ‘and should not have done that, but that my father had to go abroad, and he thought I should lose time if I went with him.’

‘And you are quite out of place here.’

‘Not more so than you are. I have been thinking, Theodora, of something of which I wish to speak to you. But we must wait for a half-holiday, when we can be alone.’

Meanwhile, Isabel Howard was very angry. She had publicly proclaimed that Miss Leigh should be her friend ; and all those who had heard her boast had seen how she had been foiled. Her enemy, Theodora Astley, had become chief friend in her stead. There were not wanting those amongst her followers who were ready to carry continually to Isabel news of the progress of the friendship. Florence and Theodora could not take advantage of the short time allowed to the latter for recreation, even to walk together in the garden, without the fact of their doing so being carried to Isabel. And now she was no longer the principal girl in the school, or rather the *show girl*, as she had hitherto been ; for Miss Leigh, being the daughter of a baronet and a public man, was now the one fixed on by Mrs. Toogood to be introduced to visitors and strangers. Of course this was naturally galling to Isabel : but Theodora had nothing to do with the change in her position ; yet against Theodora was Miss Howard’s heart set more than ever, and she resolved by some means or other, fair or foul, to separate between the friends. It was her policy to keep upon good terms with Florence Leigh, and to avoid taking offence at anything which that young lady in her outspeaking way might say ; for she wished to find out her weak point.

The half-holiday arrived. The girls were in the habit of 'engaging' with each other beforehand to sit together, making rooms, as they were called, in different corners or windows of the schoolroom, carrying these engagements even to the ticketing of particular forms and favourite stools. At times a stool of more than usual popularity would be ticketed as 'engaged' by two different parties, each, unknown to the other, fastening a piece of twine or rag to one of the legs or rungs. When the time for appropriation arrived, the stool would be claimed by both competitors, each displaying her own ticket or private mark; and the question would come to a regular fight. Theodora had always had to sit alone; for, of the elder girls, all were against her with the exception of Letitia Jones, who did not dare show that she was not so. There was, adjoining the schoolroom, a small ante-room, which was used in the morning as a washing-room; and on half-holidays the first class, which comprised all the oldest girls, was permitted to sit here. Isabel Howard, on this special half-holiday, came graciously forward to Florence Leigh, and asked if she would sit with the rest of the class in this little room. But Florence, having already made her arrangements with Theodora, answered that she could not do so; an answer which served to make Isabel more angry than ever. She returned to her companions, saying—

'No; she won't sit with us; she prefers her new friend.'

'I pity her taste!' remarked Mary Anne Carter.

‘Those two are always together whenever they can be. I call them the Inseparables,’ said Sarah Hawkurst.

Isabel Howard said nothing ; but she renewed her vow to separate them.

‘Now for a long talk,’ said Florence Leigh, as she observed that all the girls were busy with their various amusements. ‘What do you think of Isabel Howard, Theodora?’

‘I would rather not tell you what I think, because I do not like her ; and I may think worse of her than she deserves,’ Theodora answered.

‘But you *must* tell me, or we cannot get on. My idea of friendship is, that friends have nothing in the world which they keep from one another. You must tell me everything you think, and feel, and know ; and I must do the same to you.’

‘Yes ; that would be real friendship,’ said Theodora.

Florence Leigh was thinking for a while, then she said, ‘Do you know, Theo, that I don’t think I could ever forgive a person who was an untrue friend to me. What noise is that?’

Theodora and Florence were sitting against the wall which separated the schoolroom from the ante-room.

‘Some one moving in the next room, I suppose,’ said Theodora. Then, reverting to Florence’s previous remark, she said, ‘I should not have thought you were unforgiving.’

‘I mean in such an instance as that. When I love, Theo, I love very much indeed, and I don’t think I am

likely to change ; but there is something so mean in a betrayal of confidence, or in falsehood in friendship, I could never trust a person again, however much I loved her.'

'I do not suppose any one could, easily,' said Theodora. 'How plainly one hears sounds from the next room ! That seemed just like some one stirring. I say, Florence, if we are going to talk of anything particular, I think we had better move our stools a little away from here. This wall is no more than a partition.'

Florence complied with what she said, and they went to another part of the schoolroom.

Some one else besides Theodora was aware of the thinness of that wall ; for Isabel Howard was a very long time getting her workbox from a form placed against it ; and when she had removed it from the form, she rather unnecessarily placed it upon the floor to examine its contents. Indeed, so long was she that her companions more than once said to her—

'Come on, Howard ; what are you about ? Why don't you arrange your things at the table ?'

But when Florence Leigh and Theodora moved away from their places, Isabel brought her box to the table. I do not think she listened much to the story-book which Sarah Hawkhurst was reading aloud, for her brows were knit, and her thoughts seemed far away.

'I have been thinking a great deal,' commenced Florence Leigh, 'about the state of this school. Do you know that I never was in a school before in my

life ; and the way these girls go on seems perfectly horrid. They are many of them two different characters—before Mrs. Toogood, and behind her back. Theodora, some of them appear to have no clear sense of honour.'

'Worse than that,' said Theodora ; 'what do you think of this?' And she told the whole story of the accusation made by little Bertha, and of the punishment of the child, and the exultation of Isabel Howard over her own falsehood.

Florence's eyes opened wider and wider as she listened. 'I never heard anything more wicked, more atrocious,' said she. 'I am glad I did not become intimate with that girl Isabel Howard. Why did not you tell the whole story to Mrs. Toogood?'

'Because I should have had my single statement against every girl in the school, almost ; even Miss Terry would have taken part against me. I have often tried to come to some decision as to what I ought to do, but I cannot. I have been obliged to shut my eyes to all sorts of things which are wrong, because I know that complaining of them would only make matters worse. I could not have imagined that girls could have been so wicked as some are here, and you would never have guessed the things they do. Why, Florence, they get newspapers, which they know are forbidden by Mrs. Toogood, and those of the commonest kind, and horrid old circulating library books to read aloud. I daresay they may be reading one now. Mrs. Toogood has not

the least idea that such things ever come into the house.'

'How do they get them?'

'I really do not know. It was Letitia Jones told me of it; but I would not ask her any questions. I suspect a woman they call "Mother Staples" brings them for them.'

'What sort of girl is Letitia Jones?' asked Florence. 'She sat by me for some time this morning, and talked so nicely, and seemed to quite recoil from all the nonsense of the others.'

'So she has to me, sometimes. I cannot understand her.'

'Theodora, my idea is this,' said Florence suddenly; 'these girls, most of them, must have something better in them than is brought out by their flattery of Isabel Howard. I daresay she has a great deal of influence over them; but why should not you and I influence them for good as much as Isabel can do for harm? Each one we gain over to our side will not only be strength to us, but it will weaken the opposite party.'

'Would it not make dissension in the school, and party spirit, and all that sort of thing?' asked Theodora.

'Of course it will, for it will make two distinct classes; but only the two classes which are throughout the world, Theodora—those who try to do right, and those who would just as soon do wrong.'

'Yes, I see; but how would you win them over to our side?'

‘I must think of that,’ said Florence. ‘I suppose no two people are to be won in the same manner. Meanwhile, I believe it is my positive duty to let Mrs. Toogood know that her orders are constantly disobeyed.’

‘Would she believe you, only on my word?’

‘I will find out for myself; and unless I can make this “Mother Staples,” or whatever her name is, cease from coming here, and letting the girls have novels and newspapers, I will tell her that I will inform Mrs. Toogood of her.’

‘It is very brave of you, Florence; for you will make so many enemies,’ said Theodora.

‘I don’t want to make enemies, if I can help it,’ Florence Leigh answered. ‘But as to being brave, it is not so in me, Theodora; for it is a sort of thing that I rather enjoy than otherwise. You know we all have our pet duties and our unpleasant ones. I rather like the idea of worsting Mother Staples.’

Florence Leigh spoke truth in this, as she always did in everything. She did enjoy this sort of thing, which to Theodora appeared appalling.

‘But how is it that you have never seen this woman Staples?’

‘I am so seldom out in the grounds, you know: these abominations’—and Theodora punched with her closed fist the pile of stockings near her—‘will never come to an end. I sometimes think Miss Terry must sit up at night to pick fresh holes in those I have already mended.’

Florence looked at her for some time in silence, and the tears slowly gathered in her eyes. Then she said gently—

‘Theodora, of all the girls I ever met with, you are the dearest. I believe myself I could do something fine and grand if it were required of me. I know I could, for I feel it in me; but I could not behave like you. I could not spend my life in teaching little children, alternately with darning stockings, and having no recreation but learning lessons yourself.’

‘But that is a recreation!’ exclaimed Theodora. ‘You can have no idea of the relief it is to me to take a lesson in anything, even in arithmetic!’

‘It only shows how low your standard of recreation has become,’ rejoined Florence. ‘No, I could not do it; although I admire you more than I can say. Many people can be heroines under excitement, Theodora; but you have the spirit of the martyrs in you.’

‘I have nothing of the kind, you goose,’ said Theodora, laughing; ‘but I shall have a very inflated spirit in me, if I listen to your flattery any longer. Go on with your plans of reformation. I like to hear them, even if they can never be carried out.’ And Theodora laughed as lightly as she used to laugh in the old days at home; so that Isabel Howard and her clique in the adjoining room were astonished at the change.

‘What do you think of a club,’ asked Florence, ‘the members to be elected by vote, and places to be held only by the good conduct of the members? We would

have a code of rules ; and the breaking of any one of these rules should turn a member out.'

'What sort of rules ?' asked Theodora.

'For instance one—any infringement of Mrs. Toogood's orders,' answered Florence.

'I doubt if you would find the girls fall in with it,' Theodora said. 'It is the fashion to follow Isabel Howard, you see ; and as she is defiant of orders, defiance is the fashion.'

'I know that. My father says half the people in the world are led by others, without staying to question what they are about ; and they would just as soon be led in the other direction. Now, Theo, you know I don't want to say anything conceited ; but I think I might perhaps become *the fashion* as easily as Isabel Howard ; and obedience and ladylike conduct might be the fashion instead of defiance.'

'Try it, dear Florence, try it,' said Theodora eagerly. 'I begin to think I may have been very wrong in not trying to argue with the girls, instead of being content to take things as they are ; but I am nothing better than a dreamer.'

'Dreamers are just as useful as workers, if they dream right dreams,' said Florence.

'But I have always longed to be of use in the world,' said Theodora ; 'and here I am no good at all.'

'Do you think so ? God would not have put you here had He thought so.'

And Theodora said, in the foolish way in which young girls flatter each other without meaning harm—

‘Oh! Florence, how good you are!’

It did Florence no harm, at any rate, for she burst into tears as she answered—

‘I am not good; it is you that are good and patient. If I were in your place I should box Isabel Howard’s ears, and pull Miss Terry’s nose; I know I should. I could do it now. I never shall be patient and good like you. Give me those stockings—more, more;’ and Florence flung the rolled-up stockings one by one across the schoolroom, until they banged against the opposite wall. ‘There! I feel better now! Bertha, pick up those stockings, my dear, and bring them back to Miss Astley.’

Bertha looked surprised, but did as she was told, and Florence said, ‘There’s a good little girly!’ so that Bertha thenceforth thought Florence the *prettiest* girl she had ever seen, and, when the announcement of the projected club was made, was the very first to come and scrawl her name on the sheet of paper as a member.

One of Theodora’s greatest pleasures was, that she could speak to Florence Leigh of home, of her mother and sisters, and of her dead father. Of him she was never weary of talking. Amongst other things, she one day mentioned her great desire to erect some stone, however simple, to his memory. Shortly afterwards Florence Leigh said to Theodora—

‘I wish I could make tatting as well as you do; I think it is so pretty.’

‘I will teach you,’ said Theodora.

‘Oh, dear, no; I should never have the patience. By-

the-bye, Theo, did not you say you do this on commission?’

‘That is a grand way of putting it,’ Theodora answered. ‘I do it for money. I get sixpence a yard for it.’

‘Sixpence a yard! I am sure I would give you a shilling a yard if you do some for me.’

‘So I will,’ said Theodora, ‘when I am able; but not yet. I will gladly do it for you; but you shall not pay for it.’

‘Theodora, how absurd you are!’ said Florence. ‘Why should not you do it for me as well as for a shop? If I knew who takes it of you, I would go and buy it there; for I would rather have some made by you.’

‘Well, do so,’ said Theodora.

‘I think you have a great deal of wicked pride about you,’ said Florence. ‘I shall engage this piece when it is finished,’ said Florence, pulling out a length of tatting from Theodora’s basket.

‘Don’t,’ said Theodora; ‘you must not pull it about; you’ll dirty it, and the woman won’t take it.’

‘Oh!’ said Florence, immediately rubbing the tatting on the sole of her shoe, and then over the floor of the schoolroom as rapidly as possible, ‘won’t she take it if dirty? Then it is left upon my hands, and I buy this at a shilling a yard.’

‘I feel ashamed of letting you,’ said Theodora; and yet she could not help feeling pleased at Florence’s persistence, for the idea of her rapidly increasing fund was so delightful to her.

'You know,' said Florence, 'that I have more pocket-money than I know what to do with, and I cannot spend it all in hard bake like Lucy Watson. It is not my fault that my father is well off.'

The fact was, that Florence Leigh had half guessed Theodora's object in rising up early, and late taking rest, in order to work at this apparently senseless tatting.

Presently, without any object in the question, Florence asked—

'What do these great reels of cotton cost, Theo?'

'Threepence a reel,' said Theodora. 'Letitia Jones gets them for me.'

Florence was looking Theodora full in the face as she spoke; and, to her surprise, the latter flushed scarlet as she answered the question; for at the moment there recurred to Theodora's recollection that day before the last holidays, and Isabel Howard's words, 'Well, Mrs. Roundeyes, did you never guess where all your tatting cotton comes from?'

Theodora had not thought of it from that moment until the present.

Florence said nothing; but she could not help wondering why her friend flushed so. It would have been better had she asked her at the time.



## CHAPTER XIX.

Formation of the club—The ‘Anti-Clubbists’—Forming a committee—Florence is elected president—Drawing up the rules—The tide seems to be turning against Isabel.



LORENCE LEIGH was right so far: there is a fashion even in following a leader for evil.

Very few of the younger girls liked Isabel Howard—she was too tyrannical and unjust to be really popular; and when they found that some one else would take their part, and protect them against Isabel's retaliation, they gladly, one and all, became members of the club.

Of the first class, the only one at present to join was Letitia Jones. Like the bat in the fable, she was always trying to be of both parties at once; and, like the bat, she was never long acknowledged by either.

On a whole holiday, a proclamation of the proposed club was stuck up over the schoolroom mantelpiece; and after it had been read by almost all the girls in succession, in every conceivable tone of voice, the various friends and intimates drew together, talking rapidly about it.

At any rate it was a new idea. Isabel Howard said nothing, although Lucy Watson, Mary Anne Carter, and Sarah Hawkhurst were all chattering to her at the same time; and, imagining that the club movement would be obnoxious to Isabel, were indulging in such remarks as—

‘She thinks, I suppose, that she will take the lead in the school! Of course that is the object of this,’ said Sarah Hawkhurst.

‘I am sure I won’t have anything to do with it,’ said Lucy Watson. ‘I’ll hold on to Howard, whoever tries to set herself up against her.’

‘None of us are going to have anything to do with it,’ said Mary Anne Carter. ‘Who imagined for a moment that we were?’

In the midst of all this, Isabel Howard walked across the room to where sat Florence Leigh, and, with a smile, whether forced or not, Florence did not know, asked permission to put her name to the paper, as a member of the club. Florence certainly felt not a little surprised that Isabel should so quickly fall into this plan of reformation; and her generous heart smote her for having, as she thought, misjudged Isabel Howard. But none felt greater surprise than did Isabel’s colleagues, whom she had left standing at the other end of the schoolroom.

Poor, soft Lucy Watson saw no course open to her now but to follow her leader; for, in her adherence to Isabel, there was mixed up a great deal of personal affection; but Sarah Hawkhurst and Mary Anne Carter were openly indignant at the conduct of their chief,

and thereupon made a party of their own in opposition, to be called the 'Anti-Clubists,' and to consist of their two selves, a younger sister of Sarah's named Jenny, and two cousins of Mary Anne's, who, on the strength of relationship, did not think it right to oppose her principles, whose names were Jessie and Annie Mainwaring. These five immediately claimed the ante-room ; and, seizing a long form, they placed it across the doorway so as to bar the entrance. Then Florence Leigh spoke—

' You need not be afraid that we shall any of us interfere with your room, if you wish to keep it to yourselves. We are far too many in number, being the whole school, with the exception of you five, to find that small room of any use to us. You are perfectly welcome to keep it ; so you can remove the barricade.'

So the opposition had not even the pleasure of finding themselves opposed.

' The first thing to be done,' said Florence, with an air of business, ' is to form a committee ; next to choose a president. Supposing we were to say all of the first class should compose the committee ?'

There was no opposition to this ; and even Isabel Howard began to feel interested and amused at such a business-like way of doing things. So the committee was agreed upon. Two of the first class being defaulters, the names were only five—

ISABEL HOWARD.

FLORENCE LEIGH.

THEODORA ASTLEY.

LETITIA JONES.

LUCY WATSON.

It was put to the vote who should be president. There was no doubt that it rested between Florence and Isabel, and the heart of the latter beat quick, as she thought of the possibility of regaining at once all her power in an increased degree. She congratulated herself upon the brilliant step she had taken in not opposing the club. Isabel Howard was certainly a clever girl ; she might have been a very useful one.

For Florence Leigh, Isabel had of course to vote. She could not vote for herself ; but then Florence would return the compliment, and vote for Isabel. Theodora unhesitatingly gave her voice in favour of Florence ; and as readily, in opposition, Lucy Watson mentioned Isabel. All depended upon Letitia Jones, and Isabel's heart beat quick. It was but the day before that Letitia had reiterated her friendship for herself, and remarked upon the growing influence of Florence Leigh with dissatisfaction. She surely would not fail her now. But Letitia had too great a respect for the rising sun to cling now, in Florence's hour of popularity, to her old partisan. Her paper, upon being opened, was found to have the name of Florence Leigh written upon it. Isabel's face changed ; she tried to pass it off with a laugh, but it was not well done, and every one present saw her evident annoyance.

The tears of disappointment came into the eyes of Lucy Watson, and she looked sympathizingly towards Isabel,

which look, Isabel seeing, brought upon poor Lucy a rebuking frown, and a whispered 'Don't look like a fool!'

The committee then seated themselves in state, and told the admiring crowd that it might withdraw; but the admiring crowd, charmed with the novelty of the proceedings, preferred remaining within hearing distance of their representatives.

'We must draw up a list of rules for the guidance of the club,' commenced the president. 'Isabel, will you kindly write them down as they are decided upon; and will you, at the top of the paper, write that such members as do not choose to conform to the rules shall cease to belong to the club? I think, if the others agree to it, that we ought to elect you secretary.'

Everybody agreed to it, and Lucy Watson brightened up.

Isabel started as the first rule was proposed:

'That we shall in everything obey the orders of Mrs. Toogood, and enforce them upon the younger ones; and when we are aware of any violation of her orders, we shall inform the committee of it, in order that it may be inquired into.'

She hesitated before commencing to write. She half expected that some, if not almost all, of the girls would object; but, to her surprise, there was a murmur of approval from most of them. Only Lucy Watson glanced uneasily at Isabel; and Theodora Astley was quiescent. Isabel had not calculated upon the mutability of popularity. Florence Leigh, for the time being, was in the ascendant.

The rule was written ; and others followed, of lesser importance—others, of which Isabel took but little notice—until the rules grew trifling in their importance, although some of them were significant. For instance, there was one imposing a fine upon any member who spoke of or addressed another by her surname, showing that Florence Leigh was anxious to effect a revolution in the manners as well as the morals of the school.

When the holiday was over, the club apparently an established thing, and the girls were mostly occupied in committing to memory their lessons for the following day, Theodora observed to Florence—

‘You succeeded more completely than I could have supposed you would. I was astonished at the readiness with which the girls fell into your plan. Most of all, I was astonished at Isabel Howard.’

‘I was not,’ answered Florence Leigh, complacently. ‘I don’t see why all the girls, Isabel Howard included, should not be open to reason and common sense. Why should not I influence Isabel as much as she has influenced others?’

‘You appear to have done so,’ said Theodora ; ‘but I am surprised at it.’

Isabel Howard did not sleep much that night. The events of the day had upset her. In her prayers, Theodora thanked God for the good beginning that had been made in the school. I am afraid that Florence Leigh did not do so ; but she congratulated herself upon her success.



## CHAPTER XX.

A confidential conversation—The listener again—A midnight banquet—Isabel's heroics—Her reasons for joining the club—Tarts—Theodora asks to go home—Mrs. Toogood shows herself in a new character.

**F**LORENCE and Theodora were seated together in the garden. It was scarcely fit weather for sitting out of doors ; but these girls were no more prudent than other girls of their age : and they tried to imagine it was summer, while yet it was hardly spring. The first class considered themselves too old to play at the games with which the younger children were occupied ; besides, it was not often that Theodora had an opportunity of being in the garden, and such moments were too precious to be lightly spent. The two friends were seated in a little erection of planks, with a flooring of pebbles, which was styled 'the arbour ;' Theodora, as usual in her leisure moments, employed in tatting, and Florence holding in her hand a letter, which she had been reading. The eyes of the latter were filled with tears ; but it was not until the tears fell with a sharp little patter

upon the paper, that Theodora looked up and saw that something had vexed her companion.

‘What is it, dear?’ she asked. ‘Is there anything in your letter to make you cry?’

‘No,’ said Florence; ‘not more than usual. I have always the same matter to make me cry, Theo, if crying could be of any use.’

Theodora looked at the speaker, then took her hand and caressed it. Of course, at this action of hers, Florence’s tears fell faster.

‘I very seldom have a letter from papa,’ said she, ‘without feeling freshly again how lonely he must be, and more so than ever since he has parted with me; but he could not take me to Persia with him, I should have only been a burden.’ She stopped a minute or two, then added, ‘It brings poor mamma back to my mind, you see.’

‘Of course,’ said Theodora; ‘and I can feel for you there, Florence, having lost a parent myself.’

‘Theo,’ said Florence Leigh, ‘I think, had I lost a parent, as you have, I could bear to think of it much better.’

Theodora looked at her with surprise, and Florence said, ‘Poor mamma is not dead, you know.’

‘I thought she was, you never told me—’ commenced Theodora.

‘I never told any one in my life, and I would not tell any one but you; but I love you, Theo, and I can trust you,’ said Florence. ‘No, she is not dead; but she is—she is not right, dear—she is mad.’

Theodora looked shocked, she hardly knew what to say ; it seemed a matter beyond comfort ; and she could only press the hand upon which her own still rested, and murmur, ' Poor Florence ! '

Five minutes later the bell rang for reassembling in the schoolroom, and all the girls hurried towards the house.

At the foot of the stairs Theodora and Florence met Isabel Howard ; her face was flushed, and she half closed her eyes, as she leant as if for support upon the banisters.

' What is the matter ? are not you well ? ' asked Florence.

' No, my head is so bad, I feel quite giddy. I have been lying down upstairs, and have just come down, hearing that horrid bell.'

' If you are ill, had not I better tell Mrs. Toogood ? ' asked Florence. ' I think you had better go back to your bedroom ; you look ill, and I am sure the noise of the schoolroom will make you worse.'

' It may be no more than a headache,' said Isabel.

' Then I shall say you have a headache—shall I ? '

' Thank you, perhaps it would be better,' Isabel answered ; and she turned to reascend the staircase.

She did not go at once to her bedroom, however ; she leant over the top of the banisters, and watched the figures of Florence and Theodora, until they disappeared into the schoolroom ; when Florence gave her account of Isabel's health as an excuse for her absence.

That evening there were grand doings in one of the

sleeping-rooms devoted to the first class. During the visit of Miss Terry to their room, most of the girls appeared to be asleep, some snored audibly; but no sooner did the echo of her footsteps die away down the uncarpeted staircase, than all six of them started up in bed.

Three of the anti-clubists, as they styled themselves, slept in this room—Sarah Hawkhurst, Annie Mainwaring, and Mary Anne Carter—besides Isabel Howard, and her faithful Lucy Watson, with a little girl named Ada Smith.

‘Now!’ exclaimed Sarah Hawkhurst; ‘is she clean gone? Well, then, where are the lucifers?’

The lucifers were found, and, after a moment’s delay, a candle, which was produced from under one of the beds, was lighted.

‘Tallow!’ exclaimed Isabel Howard; ‘why did not you get a composite candle, at least, Lucy? How are we to snuff that horrid thing?’

‘Old Staples wouldn’t let me have a composite for less than sixpence,’ answered Lucy Watson; ‘and there was only threepence left of change. I’ll snuff it somehow.’

‘You’ll set the bed-clothes on fire if you don’t take care. Here, stick it up somewhere, can’t you?’

The candle, after a great deal of guttering and flaming, was stuck up; and then Sarah Hawkhurst said—

‘I wonder the others don’t come; we can’t begin business without them.’

As she spoke, the shuffling of feet was heard, and the

door opened, admitting Jessie Mainwaring and Jenny Hawkhurst, the remaining 'anti-clubbists.'

Then Isabel Howard turned to the little girl, Ada Smith. 'Now, you brat,' said she, 'if it had not been that we cannot get rid of you, I would not have had you here to-night, to listen to all we say.'

'I never tell, I am sure,' said Ada.

'You had better not. Look here, if you are a good girl, you shall have some of the feast ; but if ever I hear you say a word of anything that we do to-night, I'll give you such a whipping as you never had before.'

'I shan't tell,' said Ada. 'What should I tell for? Nobody else but you gives me halfpence for Old Staples.'

'That is true,' said Isabel.

'Now, Howard,' interrupted Sarah Hawkhurst, 'remember that we join in your feast on this condition, that you tell us your reason for falling in with Leigh and the Saint. For my part, I hate humbug ; and it seems to me that you humbugged us all by becoming a member of this ridiculous club.'

'My giving you this feast might show you, I should think, how much I respect the rules of the club,' observed Isabel Howard.

'That's good ; that's very well,' said Mary Anne Carter.

'I have set at naught all rules of the club, and defied the orders of Toogood ; have I not? Answer me! Have I not?' asked Isabel with the air of a heroine. There was a murmur of applause ; and Lucy Watson said, 'You have acted nobly.' And poor Lucy really believed what

she said, having but little knowledge of the meaning of her words.

‘But why did you join?’ asked Sarah Hawkhurst.

‘It was the only way of breaking this immense friendship between Leigh and Saint Theodora,’ said Isabel.

‘But you have not broken it!’

‘Wait,’ Isabel answered; ‘and in the meanwhile I have shown you that I belong to the club only in name. I am still as much as ever one of you.’

‘You are a brick,’ observed one of her hearers.

‘We should bring Terry or the “Saint” down upon us if we cheered,’ said Sarah; ‘but I vote three cheers for Howard, and we will imagine them given. So now to the feast. What have we got?’

Isabel was more popular than ever. There was a species of romance in her double dealing, proclaimed in this way, in her night dress, with her long dark hair streaming over her shoulders, and by the light of one tallow candle. There was a tone of self-devotion, which was only a tone, a sort of bandit-like daring and defiance about her, all of which won the girls, they could not have told why. Even little Ada Smith looked at her admiringly, and said—

‘I wouldn’t tell of you, Howard, for anything in the world, because you are so pretty; not even if there were no tarts.’

The tarts became the next matter of interest. Whoever had been caterer for the party had had one grand leading idea of pastry, or else Mrs. Staples had not a great variety of stock. There were greasy ‘cocked hats,’ and ‘rasp-

berry brooches,' and 'cheesecakes.' Lucy Watson was busy setting out all these luxuries upon the foot of Isabel's bed. Of course there were no plates; so the tarts were piled in heaps upon the quilt, and the girls took their seats round the edge of the bed. I am afraid they must have laid the foundation of nightmare by the number of tarts these girls ate; and I wonder that they did not feel cold, seated with hardly any covering on so chilly a night. But I doubt if school-girls feel much of such inconveniences, or often suffer from indigestion. At the commencement of the feast the chattering was rapid, although in low voices; but the tongues became tired as the piles of pastry decreased; and as the supper drew to a close, and the tallow candle burnt down almost to the end, one after the other lapsed into silence; and I believe that every one of them was glad when the entertainment was proclaimed finished, and they were all allowed to return to their beds.

It was not long after this that a great blow came upon Theodora. She received a letter from her mother, saying that Gertrude had been publicly dismissed from college, for conduct too bad to be told of in writing. Mrs. Astley was completely prostrated by the misfortune, and implored Theodora to come to her.

Theodora was aware that it was an unusual thing for one in her position to request to go home at an irregular time, and she knew that it was her mother's ignorance of the real office of a pupil teacher which allowed her to hope it. She did not expect for a moment that Mrs.

Toogood would consent to her going ; and it was with a very beating heart and anxious manner that, after morning school, she requested to be allowed to speak to the head of the establishment.

Theodora made her request very simply ; but instead of the denial at once, which she had anticipated, Mrs. Toogood asked—

‘ Did you say your mother is ill, Miss Astley ? ’

Theodora, without further thought, took her mother’s letter from her pocket, and placed it in the hands of Mrs. Toogood. The moment she had done so, she remembered what it contained relative to Gertrude, and regretted having done so. There was no doubt about the indisposition or the distress of the writer ; and Mrs. Toogood cleared her throat before she spoke again.

‘ There is no question about your duty, Miss Astley ; you must go to your mother. I have no doubt it is a bitter trial to her ; but she is quite a lady, I see by her writing and by her mode of expression.’

Theodora at another time would have wondered what the fact of her mother’s being a lady had to do with her performance of her duty ; but now she only remarked—

‘ I don’t know if I have acted wrongly, ma’am, in showing you my mother’s letter. I did not at the moment remember how much she says about Gertrude.’

‘ I do not think you are wrong, Miss Astley,’ Mrs. Toogood answered ; ‘ and you need not fear that your confidence shall ever be betrayed. None ever found it so with me, I can assure you.’ Presently Mrs. Too-

good said, 'Allow me to offer you a glass of wine, Miss Astley.'

Had Theodora only known how special a favour this was, reserved ordinarily for only those whom Mrs. Toogood delighted to honour, she would not have dreamt of declining it with a simple 'No, thank you, ma'am; indeed I would rather not.' If Miss Terry had but known that the glass of wine, which she would so gratefully have accepted, and so humbly, and with so many polite speeches have drunk, had been offered to and refused by Theodora Astley whom she despised! Mrs. Toogood merely smiled at the unworldliness of her companion, and gave her leave to make preparations for her departure as soon as she wished; for which Theodora warmly thanked her.

'What a shame it is that I have all this time been thinking Mrs. Toogood unfeeling, and unkind, and disagreeable, and all sorts of things!' said Theodora to Florence. 'I am so sorry now that I ever did! She is such a dear, kind old thing, and I quite love her.'

'That's right; now go into the other extreme,' said Florence. 'And how long are you to stop away? and what am I to do until you come back? I shall hardly have a soul to speak to that I care about talking with.'

'I don't know how long I shall be away, Florence; it depends on my mother's health. She has never been strong; and now her account of herself really makes me quite uncomfortable. Mrs. Toogood did not say anything about time.'

'I suppose she thought she could trust you to come back as soon as your mother can spare you.'

'She does not know whether she can trust me or not,' said Theodora. 'She knows nothing whatever about me. I have hardly spoken to her beyond "Good morning" half a dozen times since I came here.'

'Still, I suppose she may have eyes,' observed Florence, 'and may be capable of using them.'

'Oh! Florence,' said Theodora, her own eyes filling with tears, 'you do so overrate me; you do indeed. If you only knew me better than you do—' She stopped, for some of the girls came within hearing, and the subject was turned.





## CHAPTER XXI.

Gertrude's ill-conduct—The Clarkes—They arrive uninvited at Mrs. Astley's house—Specimens of vulgar young women—Their proposal—Mrs. Astley's objections—Gertrude's insolence and defiance of authority to her mother.

**T**HEODORA had expected to find her mother looking ill; but she was not prepared for the great change in her appearance which she found. Mrs. Astley had been suffering silently for a long time past. Of course this change was more apparent to one who saw Mrs. Astley after an interval; but to every one it must have been plain. Yet Gertrude affected not to see it, and indignantly attacked Theodora on the day of her return.

‘She is not half so ill as she pretends,’ said she. ‘Now that you are home, she will make you believe all sorts of things. And as to me, my leaving school has nothing to do with her illness.’

‘Gertrude,’ said Theodora, ‘I think the way you speak of mamma is perfectly dreadful and wicked. I believe your leaving school, and your whole conduct, has a great deal to do with her illness.’

'Do you? And who cares what you think, I should like to know?' said Gertrude with her customary rudeness. 'As if I was going to stay at a disgusting school!' continued she. 'Not if I could get away, you may be sure. I did it on purpose; for I knew I should be kicked out. I'll tell you what I did—'

'I don't wish to hear,' said Theodora.

'Then you shall hear, Miss Propriety. I called old Mother Vincent a beast, and several other little words; and I threw Johnson's Dictionary at her when she said I didn't know my lesson—as if *I* was going to learn lessons; and I—'

'I tell you, Gertrude, I don't want to hear. I have no doubt you behaved as badly as you could; and I think you are a very wicked girl.'

Gertrude made a hideous face at her sister, and capered about the room; then, seeing from the window two girls passing by, she exclaimed, 'Oh! there are the Clarkes! Don't tell mamma I am gone with them.' And, seizing her hat, she clapped it on her head, and ran after the strangers.

Theodora looked from the window after 'the Clarkes.' They were vulgar-looking, red-faced girls, dressed in ill taste; and, as her sister joined them, she could not help thinking that she formed a contrast to them in appearance; for Gertrude was tall, and slight, and like a lady, notwithstanding her unladylike sentiments.

'How pretty she is!' thought Theodora. 'I wish she was not such a naughty girl. I wonder who those Clarkes are!'

Just then her mother slowly entered the room—so slowly and feebly that Theodora did not hear her, until she was near herself. She turned from the window, and went and kissed her.

‘God bless you, my child!’ said Mrs. Astley. ‘You are a dear good girl to come to me, Theo.’

Theodora placed her mother comfortably in a chair, and Mrs. Astley asked—

‘Of what were you thinking when I came in?’

‘I was thinking how very pretty Gertrude is, mother.’

‘Yes, I suppose she is pretty ; everybody says so, and, what is worse, tells her so. She was always a pretty child. Where is she, Theo ? I thought she was here with you. Never mind, my dear ; the room is more quiet without her. So long as she is not with those Clarkes, it does not matter.’

‘Who are the Clarkes?’ asked Theo, colouring crimson at her knowledge that Gertrude was at the moment with them.

‘They are people who have come since you left home —vulgar people. I don’t know who or what they are,’ answered Mrs. Astley. ‘There are two girls, who are very objectionable indeed. Gertrude knows my dislike to them : indeed, I scarcely know how she made their acquaintance ; but, finding that she had done so, I forbade her becoming intimate with them. My orders, however, might as well be spoken to the winds as to Gertrude. She is, I know, very frequently with the Clarkes, and their influence has made her even worse than she was before.’

Theodora was silent, for there was nothing satisfactory to be said ; and Mrs. Astley resumed—

‘They have not yet made an entrance into this house ; and I hope Gertrude will not be so lost to all regard for my wishes as to invite them in.’

Theodora hoped so too. She little knew how soon the hope was to be brought to an end.

Gertrude returned after an interval of an hour, but said nothing of where she had been ; and her mother, probably to avoid giving her an opportunity of behaving ill, did not question her.

The following morning, while all were seated in the only sitting-room the little cottage afforded, Theodora hearing Edith and Alice’s lessons, in order to save her mother the trouble, there came a noise of loud voices, and footsteps along the gravel walk of the garden. Gertrude tossed her head defiantly, but changed colour as she recognised the voices. Mrs. Astley half rose. Had there been another room into which the visitors could be shown, she would have desired that they should be ushered elsewhere ; but she recollect ed, just in time, that there was no such escape, and she glanced reprovingly at Gertrude.

‘Well,’ said Gertrude in a loud voice, and laughing, ‘I can’t help it if they choose to come. I am sure I have never asked them ; but they said last night that they must come and have a stare at Theodora.’ At the same moment Gertrude opened the door, saying, ‘You can come in here. We have only this one room, you know, and you mustn’t mind all this litter.’

‘Oh ! how funny !’ exclaimed one of the Miss Clarkes.

The next minute they both flounced into the room, and, going straight up to Mrs. Astley, who had risen and bowed rather stiffly to them, they held out their great hands, saying—

‘We thought we wouldn’t stand upon ceremony any longer, though you have not called upon us ; but we may just as well be good friends for all that—as Gertrude and us are *awful* friends ; ain’t we, Gertrude ?’

Gertrude laughed rather nervously. Perhaps she did not feel very proud of her ‘*awful* friends,’ when she saw them in contrast to her mother and sister. Then the Miss Clarkes turned to Theodora, saying—

‘Oh ! this is Theodora, of course. We have heard plenty about you ; haven’t we, Loo ?’ And she actually winked her eye at her sister. ‘You are one of the “goodies,” it seems. I hope you won’t be shocked at me and Loo. We don’t pretend to be goodies.’

‘Will you not take a seat ?’ asked Mrs. Astley, constraining herself from duty to be courteous to her very obnoxious visitors.

‘Loo’ was already seated, and chattering rapidly to Gertrude.

‘Now, I’ll tell you what we came about,’ recommenced the elder Miss Clarke, turning to Mrs. Astley, and plumping herself into a chair, which Edith had brought for her, without even a ‘thank you.’ ‘You must do it, so it is of no use saying no ; and so I tell you beforehand. There is a jolly circus come into the town this morning. It will

only be here two days, and Gertrude must go with us. She can't come to no harm.'

Miss Clarke, in her excitement, had forgotten her grammar more than usual, and had dropped all the h's in the foregoing sentence.

'I cannot allow Gertrude to go,' said Mrs. Astley quietly.

'Why? What is your reason?' asked Miss Loo rudely. 'Think circuses wicked, perhaps. That's *Theodora's* doing, I'll be bound. Well, it is uncommon envious of her, if she persuades you against her sister's going, because she is too good to go herself. What is your reason?'

'I do not think it necessary to explain my reasons to everybody,' answered Mrs. Astley.

'You might just as well let me go, mamma,' burst out Gertrude. 'It is very disagreeable of you. I never have any fun at all; and I want to go. It is a shame. I say it is a shame that I should not be allowed to go.'

The two Miss Clarkes laughed, and one of them said, 'Here's a spurt! What a plucky little thing she is!' Then, turning to Theodora, she said, 'Of course you have heard of her calling her schoolmistress names, and flinging the book at her head. Was it not rich? I would have given worlds to have seen it. I do admire Gertrude, I must say; she has such spirit!'

'I *shall* go to the circus,' resumed Gertrude.

'We will not talk about it now, Gertrude,' said Mrs. Astley, trembling with agitation and weakness.

‘But we will talk about it!’ returned Gertrude vehemently. ‘I won’t be put off in this way. I want to know your reason, as Loo Clarke says.’

‘Oh! here’s a fine noise!’ exclaimed the last-mentioned individual. ‘Come on, Carry; we had best trot;’ and in another moment the two Miss Clarkes were running down the garden walk.

‘Now, mamma,’ continued Gertrude, in the same tone as before, ‘what reason have you for my not going to the circus? I am sure papa has been dead quite long enough for you not to make that an excuse.’

Theodora started with horror at Gertrude’s unfeeling allusion; but poor Mrs. Astley must have been used to such cruel speeches, for she answered gently—

‘It is not your father’s death, Gertrude, that I should bring forward as a reason for your not going; it is that I do not choose you to go to a circus, or anywhere, with my sanction, with those two girls. They are not fit companions for you, or any lady.’

‘Who else is there to go with me?’ asked Gertrude. ‘You won’t; and I suppose Theo won’t.’

‘You should say, with regard to me, cannot instead of won’t, Gertrude. You know that I could no more endure such a fatigue than I could walk half a dozen miles; and of course Theo is no protection for you. She can no more go alone than you can.’

‘Of course she can’t; and you can’t if you won’t,’ retorted Gertrude. ‘But I shall go to the circus. I shall go with the Clarkes.’

'Gertie!' exclaimed Theodora, shocked beyond expression at her sister.

'You just mind your own business, and hold your tongue, Theo!' said Gertrude.

'Gertrude, I forbid your going,' said Mrs. Astley.

Gertrude left the room, walked up to her bedroom, and slammed the door. Then Mrs. Astley laid her head upon the table, and cried. Theodora felt distressed for her mother, and disgusted with Gertrude. She scarcely knew what to say, when, in the midst of Mrs. Astley's emotion, Mr. Morgan came in. He had not yet seen Theodora; but his welcome and greetings were cut short by the sight of her mother, and he asked, in a subdued voice, what was the matter.

'Gertrude,' answered Theodora, not caring to enter into explanations about her sister's conduct.

'Gertrude deserves to be shut up in her room and kept on bread and water for a week,' said Mr. Morgan. 'She is a bad girl, and not worth distressing yourself about, my dear Mrs. Astley. But is it anything new? What has she done now?'

Theodora would have avoided answering the question; but Mrs. Astley rapidly detailed the circumstances of the circus, and of Gertrude's impertinence.

'I would not let her go to the circus if there were twenty respectable people ready to take her,' answered Mr. Morgan, as Mrs. Astley concluded with a regret that she could not find any one who would with propriety take Gertrude to the show. 'She ought not to be allowed to go to a circus

for the next six years. I think, if you will allow me, Mrs. Astley, I will just go up to her room, and have a talk with her. It is too bad that she should upset you in this way.'

'Well, my dear Mr. Morgan,' said Mrs. Astley, 'I think perhaps that you might influence her more than any one else. If she has cause to respect any one, she has reason to respect you.'

Mr. Morgan looked at Theodora, thinking of the many times he had received impudence instead of respect on the part of Gertrude ; but he, all the same, left the room with the intention of striving to bring the refractory girl to reason. Mrs. Astley and Theodora heard the doctor's footsteps ascending the stair, then stop at Gertrude's door ; but instead of entering the room, the footsteps returned by the way they had gone, and Mr. Morgan reappeared at the sitting-room door. He looked very blank as Mrs. Astley and Theodora glanced at him.

'She is gone,' he said. 'The cunning little wench must have crept past this door to avoid our hearing her. Never mind, Mrs. Astley, I will follow her. It is many years since I have been to a circus ; but I'll go this evening if I never go again.'

'How kind you are !' murmured Mrs. Astley ; and the next moment Mr. Morgan was gone.



## CHAPTER XXII.

Mr. Morgan goes to the circus—The vulgar behaviour of the Miss Clarkes—Miss Carry's hat—Mr. Morgan argues with Gertrude, but without effect.

**W**HILE Mrs. Astley and Theodora were anxiously thinking about Gertrude, Mr. Morgan walked to the neighbouring town, a distance of about a mile from Chatterton, and entered the tent where was held the circus. Amidst the crowd of heads and bonnets, at first he had some little difficulty in recognising Gertrude; but, after a while, he distinguished the red bold faces of the Clarkes, surmounted by very small hats and very large green feathers. He made his way to the spot where they were sitting; and no sooner did they catch sight of him, than they both screamed at him at once—

‘Why, if here ain’t the doctor! Here’s fun! Come and sit alongside of us; do, Mr. Morgan, now,’ exclaimed Miss Carry.

‘Well, I never! Here’s doings, for the doctor to come to a circus! Won’t I tell Mrs. Astley of you, and Theodora? they’ll never speak to you again.’

Mr. Morgan laughed, and answered, 'Here, make room for me between you young ladies. Gertrude, sit a little closer,' and he took his place by Gertrude Astley, and began talking to her about the performance.

But the Miss Clarkes would not allow themselves to be shut out from the conversation. They chattered, and laughed, and screamed, constantly calling upon Gertrude and Mr. Morgan to share in their enthusiasm, so that every one in the tent could see that they formed one party.

When the circus was at an end, Mr. Morgan drew Gertrude's arm through one of his; whereupon Miss Caroline Clarke immediately took possession of the other.

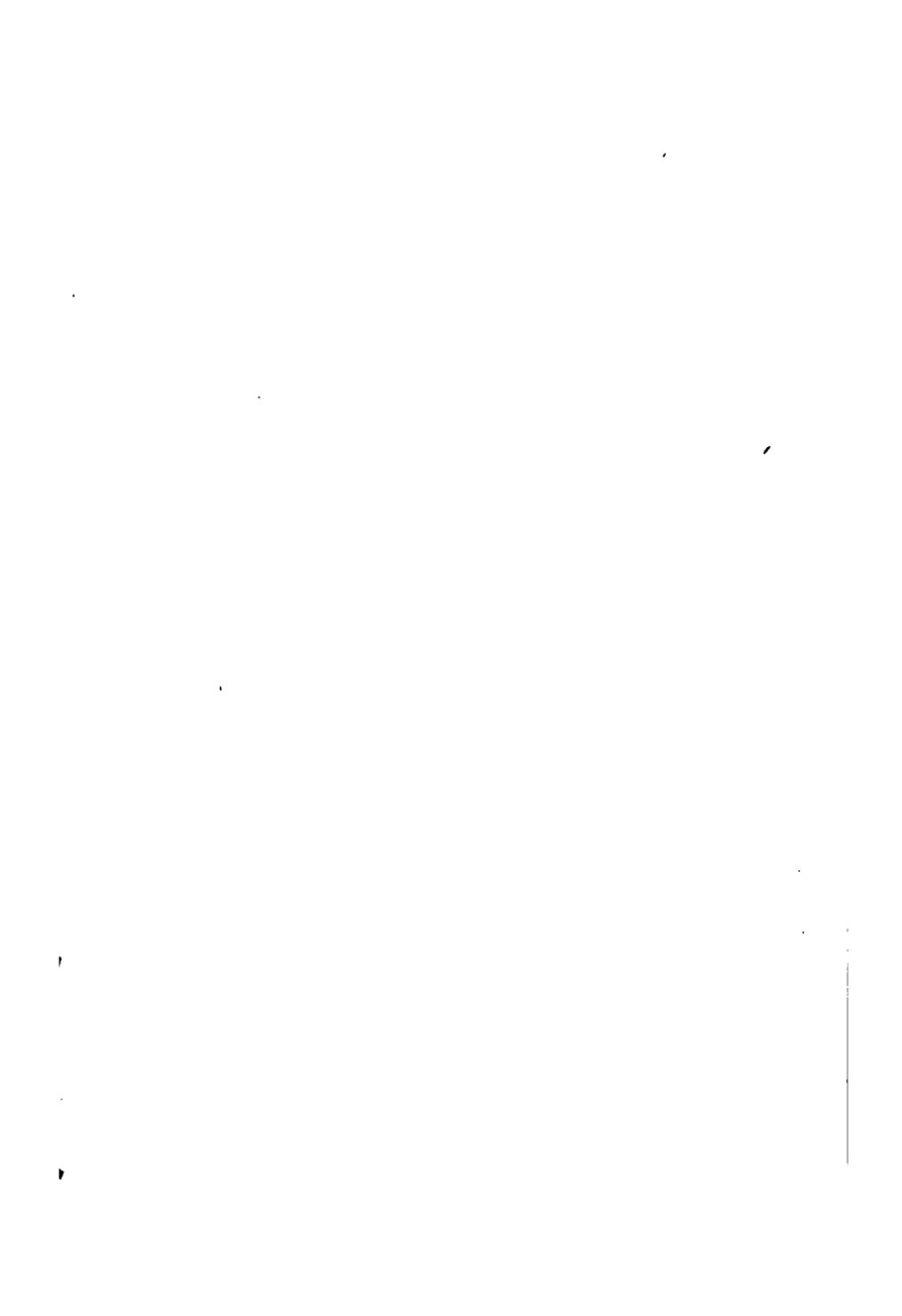
'Oh! come, that is not fair,' said Mr. Morgan. 'You must not leave your sister to walk by herself.'

'Oh! never mind; we'll all walk together,' answered Miss Louisa; and she ran round to the other side of Gertrude, and linked her arm into hers.

'We shall be blocking up the way,' said Mr. Morgan, trying to turn the subject into a joke, although he felt ashamed of the bold vulgar girls he was walking with. 'I am afraid it is actionable to walk four abreast.'

'Oh! I don't care if it is,' shouted Miss Louisa. 'I think it is great fun. I am glad you came, Doctor; for now we can make as much noise as we like without being spoken to.'

'I don't know that you can, though, even with my protection, Miss Louisa. Don't try to make more than you are making at present, pray.'





Mr. Morgan runs after Carry's hat.—*Page 169.*

Louisa Clarke burst out into a louder laugh than any of her preceding ones. Now, if there is one thing more unpleasant than another in a young woman, it is a rude boisterous laugh. There is no sound in the world so pretty as girls' laughter, to my mind ; but Miss Clarke's laugh was unrestrained and unmusical in the extreme. Each time she burst out afresh Mr. Morgan shuddered ; and it was a relief to him when they were clear of the streets of the town, and on the country road to Chatterton. They did not advance so much of their way, however, without a misadventure. Turning a corner, Miss Carry's smart hat and feather whisked off her head, and blew down the street. She gave a scream of horror, and stood staring in a way to attract the notice of every one. Several rude men and boys stopped and gazed at her, and laughed and made remarks aloud ; while her sister Miss Louisa exclaimed—

‘ Serve you right, Carry ! I told you again and again to put a 'lastic on to it ; but you are that idle that one may as well speak to a toad.’

Mr. Morgan had run after the hat, which he had some difficulty in recovering, for the wind kept catching it and blowing it, sometimes trundling like a hoop along the dirty pavement, sometimes hopping along the street, with the long feather blowing out straight from it. At length it stopped against the grating of a gutter ; and he picked it up, covered with dirt, and draggled, and, returning on his way, delivered it to Miss Clarke. He was not surprised, but very much disgusted, to find her and her sister

vehemently talking over the performances of the circus with two young men of the town—the son of the butcher, and his cousin, a linendraper's boy. Gertrude Astley stood apart, looking proudly indignant, while the young women and the young men—who were very well matched in appearance and manners—joked together, sometimes evidently at Gertrude's expense.

As soon as Mr. Morgan made his appearance, the men moved away, raising their hats in a flirting manner to the Clarkes, who shouted after them some concluding witticism, and then making a most deferential bow to Gertrude, who took no notice of them whatever.

'So, you see, we have had some gentlemen with us, Doctor,' said Miss Carry. 'We haven't been wasting our time in your absence.'

Mr. Morgan felt too much annoyed to give her any answer; but he handed her the hat. It was received with a positive howl of grief; and Miss Carry sobbed out, as soon as she could control herself sufficiently to speak—

'It is quite spoilt. Why didn't you catch it sooner? You might just as well— Oh ! what shall I do? It's my best 'at, my very best 'at, and cost eight and sixpence, and the feather alone was five shillings. Boo ! hoo !'

Mr. Morgan was so ashamed of this exhibition, as it was gradually drawing a crowd of dirty children round the afflicted one, who felt interested, naturally, in seeing a grown-up woman behave as foolishly as one of themselves, that he could only use all his endeavours and persuasions

to get Miss Clarke to move on, the which she consented to do after a time, scolding at and quarrelling with her sister the whole way about having or not having put a 'lastic in her 'at ; and crying and sobbing all the time like a great overgrown baby, until her naturally high-coloured face was scarlet, and her features swollen and blistered with tears.

Mr. Morgan was only too thankful when they arrived at the house where the Miss Clarkes lived, and he could leave them at the gate. When they were out of sight, his feelings could no longer be kept down, and he said to Gertrude—

‘ Well, I hope you had reason to be proud of your vulgar friends to-night, Gertrude. I have hitherto imagined that you were a lady ; you will not continue like one long, if you are to associate intimately with the Miss Clarkes and their friends.’

Gertrude had, in her heart, felt very much ashamed of her companions ; but as soon as Mr. Morgan commenced the subject, her proud spirit took offence at what she considered his interference, and she answered—

‘ The Clarkes are very nice, good-tempered girls, and I like them very much. It is not necessary, because I know them, that I should know butcher-boys and linendrapers. I shall tell them that they are not fit companions for them.’

‘ Then you will speak without knowing anything about it, Gertrude. Butcher-boys, as you call them, are just their proper companions ; for the Clarkes’ father was a butcher.’

‘How do you know?’ asked Gertrude, getting very red. ‘I don’t believe it,’ resumed she, rudely. ‘Carry herself told me that her father was a man of consequence, and kept his carriage.’

‘So do most butchers, my dear, for carrying about their meat. You seem to be an apt pupil of the Miss Clarkes, I must say, Gertrude, for you are becoming vulgar-minded. However, you may believe me or not as you choose. Doctors hear all sorts of things, you know; and I tell you that the Clarkes are not fit associates for your father’s daughter.’

Gertrude sulked for a time, then she said—

‘I thought you always preached, you *good* people, that birth is of no consequence so long as people do right; they may be as vulgar as they like.’

Mr. Morgan laughed. ‘What a wrong-headed, perverse little maid you are, Gertie! If the Clarkes were quiet, well-behaved, modest girls, I am sure neither your dear mother nor I should find fault with you for associating with them, and neither of us should stop to inquire whether their father had chanced to be a butcher or a baronet. So long as the world continues, Gertrude, there must be distinctions of class; and these distinctions arise and are kept up by the differences of minds and manners. If the son or daughter of a butcher is a gentleman or lady in mind and manners, such may join themselves to the class above them without much question; but such young women as the Clarkes can never be in any degree lady-

like, and are fit only for the company of their equals in station. Do you understand me?’

Gertrude understood him perfectly well ; but she did not choose to admit it, so she answered—

‘I understand you have a special spite against these unfortunate Clarkes ; and you are excessively inconsistent, I think ; for I have seen you myself shake hands with the filthiest beggars, whom I wouldn’t speak to.’

‘I don’t think they were beggars, though, Gertrude, although they may have been very poor,’ answered Mr. Morgan gently. ‘And whether you consider me inconsistent or no, I tell you that I should be ashamed of myself if I would not give my hand to any honest man or woman, although they might be of the very poorest. Cannot you understand that a day labourer in his position is as much to be respected as a gentleman in his? It is only when they affect to be above what they are in reality that they are despicable.’

‘No, I don’t understand you at all,’ answered Gertrude, rudely ; ‘and I think you are very ridiculous. I don’t care a bit what you say ; I shall do as I choose ; so there !’

Mr. Morgan sighed. ‘It is of no use to talk to you, my dear, I see. I only hope, Gertrude, that you will see what a very self-willed, foolish child you are, before you bring the consequences of your folly on yourself.’

‘Thank you ; you are very kind,’ said she, intending to be witty in Miss Clarke’s style ; ‘but I am no longer a child, I beg to remind you.’

‘I can quite well remember the day and hour of your birth, my dear,’ replied Mr. Morgan, ‘and your youth is the only excuse you have for your perverseness. Don’t try to make me forget even that excuse, Gertrude.’

To Gertrude’s surprise Mr. Morgan’s eyes were filled with tears as he spoke; but this proof of his interest in her, which ought to have touched her, had the contrary effect. They had reached her mother’s cottage, and as they stopped, she said—

‘Here we are, and here is an end of the sermon, thank goodness. Good-night. Oh! by-the-bye, won’t you come in?’

‘No, thank you,’ said he, smiling at her rudeness, and he watched her sadly until she slammed the hall door after her, and ran up at once to her bedroom without a word to her mother or sister.





## CHAPTER XXIII.

Mrs. Staples visits Prospect House—Isabel's plot is being carried out—The old woman enters into the scheme—Isabel's ready falsehood—Her artful conduct to Florence Leigh, who is deceived by her—A bad exchange of friends.

**M**EANWHILE,' at Prospect House, Theodora's absence was Isabel Howard's opportunity. One morning, in the half-hour which was allowed for the garden between breakfast and the opening of school, Isabel leant against a low brick wall, which bounded Mrs. Toogood's premises. On the other side of the wall there was a lane, shut in from observation by a hedge. Isabel knew well that she had no right to be there; for the girls were forbidden to go beyond a certain line in the garden. She had watched her opportunity, and had crept along behind the screen of the bushes until she had reached this spot; and now she constantly looked behind her in a quick, nervous way, as if listening for some signal; for she had placed Lucy Watson at the boundary to watch; and Lucy was provided with a dog-whistle, the which she was instructed

to sound should there be any necessity for Isabel's return, or should the school-bell ring without her hearing it.

On the other side of the wall there stood an old woman with a large open basket upon one arm, and another of the same kind, full of most disgusting-looking specimens of pastry, stood upon the ground at her feet. She was well dressed, but dirty and disreputable in appearance; and her hands and face looked as if it was a long time since they had been washed.

'Now Mrs. Staples,' said Isabel,—for this was the identical 'Mother Staples' of whom we have several times heard,—'you know I have always been a good friend to you; haven't I, now?'

'So you have, Miss Howard,' answered the woman. 'I'd be the last to say as you haven't, my dear. Bless your bright eyes; you've a pretty face, my dear, there's no mistake about that.'

'Never mind my face,' said Isabel, but looking at the same time pleased with the flattery. 'I want to remind you that but for me, you would never have got any custom here.'

'No, my dear, that's true; you've stood my friend many a time,' said Mrs. Staples.

'And I've bought pounds and pounds worth of things of you; haven't I?'

Mrs. Staples looked doubtful about the 'pounds and pounds worth'; so, after a pause, she said in a wheedling tone of voice—

'What is it you want, dearie?'

'I only want you to do one thing,' said Isabel, colouring at finding that the cunning old woman had at once seen through her design. 'I only want you to say something for me ;' and, as she spoke, she reached her hand over the wall, and put a half-crown into the hand of Mrs. Staples.

'Lawks! I'll say anything you please, my beauty! What is it as you wants of your Staples?'

'Perhaps you have heard that we have a new girl—at least not very new now; but she has never been seen by you—Miss Leigh.'

The old woman nodded.

'Well, she is a prim, stuck-up thing,' continued Isabel, 'and thinks everything dreadfully wicked. She has made up her mind to tell Toogood about you, and stop your coming here; so I warn you.'

'Drat her!' murmured Mrs. Staples.

'Of course I don't wish that to happen,' continued Isabel, with almost as much cunning as the old woman; 'for I think it would be a shame to stand in the way of honest trade.'

'To be sure, to be sure, my dear Miss Howard; and what would you have me do now?' asked Mrs. Staples.

'Well,' said Isabel, 'this Miss Leigh will take the first opportunity of speaking to you, the first time she sees you.'

'But I shall keep out of her way, my dear.'

'No, no,' said Isabel; 'you must not do that. If you will act as I tell you, it will be all right. Say that you have been encouraged in coming here by all the most well-behaved of the girls, and that you had not the least

idea that bringing and selling things were contrary to the orders of Mrs. Toogood.'

Mrs. Staples winked her eye and chuckled.

'Then mention the name of Miss Astley. Say she encouraged you by constantly buying tatting cotton.'

'Miss Astley!' objected Staples. 'I never see her that I knows on, my dear.'

'Well, it's all the same,' said Isabel, impatiently. 'Astley employed another girl to get the cotton; but it comes to the same thing. Besides, Astley is gone home now, so that it can't much signify. Remember I have been your best friend in the school, and if you do as I wish you, I shall not forget it.'

'I'll say it, dearie; leastways, what is it I am to say?'

Isabel rapidly repeated her instructions; and, as she heard the call agreed upon—the whistle blown by Lucy Watson—she added—

'Now, *do* understand; and remember to say what I tell you, or you will find your trade here at an end.'

She ran back to the garden in the same way as she had left it. The girls had mostly gathered round the entrance door, where they stood chattering, as if in these few last moments they had everything to say which they might have said during the last half-hour, and waiting for what was called the little bell, which was a notice that Mrs. Toogood was about to enter the schoolroom.

'Where have you been, Howard?' asked Mary Anne Carter. 'We have been shouting after you all over the place.'

Isabel jerked her head towards the field.

'Got anything?' asked Mary Anne.

'No.'

'Not even a lollipop for your faithful friend?'

Isabel laughed and shook her head.

'Why, what had become of you, Isabel?' asked Florence Leigh.

'I have been at the other end of the garden, in the arbour, and I fell asleep,' answered Isabel Howard. 'They say they have been shouting for me.'

'Rather an odd hour of the day to go to sleep, you lazybones,' said Florence Leigh laughingly.

'I had a bad night,' answered Isabel, with the greatest coolness. Lying came very easily to her of late; she had had so much practice.

Two of her schoolfellows, and companions of her bedroom, put their heads together and laughed, and one said to the other—

'I believe she slept like a top all night through. I know I heard her snoring several times when I awoke. She is a clever girl. I am quite sure that last was a cram.'

'Cram,' you must understand, was the fashionable word for a falsehood.

Isabel overheard the last remark, although the rest of her companions did not; and, far from being offended at the aspersion on her truth, she turned round to Sarah Hawkhurst and Annie Mainwaring, who were the speakers, and made a face, and smiled, as if she had been detected in

doing something very clever. You see at what a low ebb the morals of these girls were.

The next moment the little bell tinkled out, and there was a general rush to the schoolroom. It was on that same afternoon that Florence Leigh walked up and down one of the garden paths alone. Several of the girls glanced at her as she passed, but none offered to join her. Few were sufficiently intimate with her to volunteer their company unasked ; and everybody could observe that there was something more than usual which had distressed her.

It was the day whereon the mails from Persia were delivered ; and Florence, as usual, had received a letter, which, by the girls, was supposed to be from her father.

Isabel Howard had also been unusually silent from the time she had seen the delivery of the foreign letter to Florence. Now she watched her for a time as she passed up and down the path ; then, as if suddenly taking a resolution, she walked up to Florence and joined her.

‘Poor Florence !’ said she, after she had walked by her side for a minute or two, and had placed her arm within that of the other girl. ‘Poor dear girl ! You think, perhaps, because I am so full of rattle and nonsense that I don’t feel for you ; but I do indeed, Florence Leigh. It must be so very hard to bear.’

‘What do you mean ?’ asked Florence. ‘What do you mean ?’

‘Now I hope I have not said anything to annoy you,’ said Isabel, appearing shocked at her own impulsiveness, and then lapsing into silence.

‘You have said too much to hold your tongue now, Miss Howard,’ observed Florence haughtily.

‘Oh, dear me!’ exclaimed Isabel. ‘I wish I had never spoken. And you call me “Miss Howard,” which sounds so unkind, Florence. But indeed I would never have alluded to the subject, if I had not thought that most of the girls have been told of it.’

‘What subject?’ asked Florence. ‘I wish you would explain yourself.’

Isabel lowered her voice. ‘I thought,’ said she, ‘that you might be glad to know that some one, at least, sympathises with you, instead of making it a matter of gossip, or I would not have spoken, indeed I would not, Florence—I mean about your poor mother.’

‘What have you heard about my mother?’ asked Florence, turning very pale and setting her lips.

‘Only what Theodora Astley told me and the rest; but it may not be true,’ answered Isabel, with her eyes on the ground. ‘True or not, it has often made me feel sorry for you when I have seen you look unhappy, as you do to-day.’

‘Did Theodora Astley tell you what I said to her about my mother?’ asked Florence Leigh, looking Isabel full in the face.

Isabel did not feel very comfortable under her fixed look; but she was of dark complexion, and did not show blushing so easily as most; and she hoped that her companion did not notice her change of colour as she answered, ‘Yes.’

‘I could not have believed it,’ burst out Florence. ‘How wicked! How treacherous! How deceitful!’

‘You do not know Theodora Astley,’ answered Isabel. ‘Did not it ever strike you as strange, that when you came here first, she had not a friend in the school?’

‘I thought you were all against her,’ said Florence; ‘and I thought you were very cruel. Can it be possible that she has deceived me? I can hardly believe it. I cannot bear to believe it.’

‘As you please, Miss Leigh,’ said Isabel, with a look of hurt pride. ‘She deceived me, and so I can more easily believe that she might do the same in your case. But do not take my word for it, I beg. There’s Watson—I mean Lucy.’

‘I beg your pardon, Isabel,’ said Florence, sympathizing with her companion’s supposed wounded feeling. ‘I beg your pardon; but it is so difficult to throw away all at once my confidence in a friend. I have loved Theodora Astley.’

‘I know you have, dear,’ answered Isabel; ‘and it is that which has prevented me from telling you what sort of a girl she is long ago. I should never have told you had not this come out to-day by accident. I always think, as we learn in the poem, “Where ignorance is bliss, ’tis folly to be wise.”’

‘I don’t know,’ mused Florence. ‘In a case of this kind, I might have involved myself in further difficulties had I told other things, beside that to which you alluded, to Theodora Astley. Oh, I cannot bear to think that

she betrayed me!' said Florence, with a fresh burst of feeling, the tears starting to her eyes.

Lucy Watson had obeyed the call of her superior, and was all this while hovering at a little distance. Now Isabel said to her—

'Lucy, who told you that of which you were speaking last night—about Miss Leigh's poor mamma? I will not mention exactly what I mean; you understand.'

Lucy did understand, for she had been primed beforehand by Isabel Howard, and she answered—

'Theodora Astley.'

Florence again turned pale, but it was with suppressed anger, and Isabel said—

'That's all I want to ask. Tell Sarah Hawkhurst I want to speak to her.'

Lucy disappeared; and presently Sarah came leaping towards them, quite unsuspecting of what was in the wind, calling out—

'Hullo! what is it? Who wants me? Oh! Howard! Well, what's your pleasure?'

Isabel looked grave and sad, and, turning to Florence Leigh, she said—

'Ask her yourself,' for she was half afraid that Sarah might blurt out the truth; and she knew she had come to the most dangerous point in her wicked game.

'Ask me what? What have I done? Please 'm, I haven't been and gone and done nothin',' said Sarah, pretending to cry.

'Who told you,' said Florence very slowly, 'a report

which seems to be about the school, relative to my mother?’

Sarah glanced at Isabel, who just raised her eyes, and shook her head slowly.

‘Tell me at once,’ said Florence again.

‘No, I shan’t,’ answered Sarah. ‘I am not a blab, whatever I am. I never tell tales. It is enough that I heard it from a friend of yours; though, I am sure, it makes no difference to me, or, I should think, to anybody, whether your mother is in a madhouse or no. I am sure I don’t care.’

‘Miss Leigh insists upon knowing,’ observed Isabel Howard judiciously.

‘Then Miss Leigh may insist until she is black in the face,’ elegantly retorted Miss Hawkurst. ‘I am not going to be bullied into anything; and I have said I shan’t tell. You know, Howard, that I never betray a friend. I think it is mean; and I hate meanness.’ And Sarah skipped away in the same manner as she had come.

‘Would you like to ask Mary Anne Carter?’ said Isabel.

‘No, no; that is quite enough. I only wish to hear no more of it,’ said Florence. ‘And, Isabel, I apologize to you for not believing your bare word, without referring to any of the other girls.’

‘Oh! it was but natural,’ said Isabel. ‘Don’t apologize, dear Florence; but you will believe me for the future, will you not? You will trust me, and let me love you?’

Florence leant forward and kissed the treacherous girl ; and then, in her disappointment, and sorrow, and excitement, she put her arms round Isabel Howard's neck, and burst into passionate tears.





## CHAPTER XXIV.

Florence Leigh is brought into contact with Mrs. Staples—The old woman acts her part well—Florence led astray—She determines henceforth to throw off Theodora.

**H**E next thing to be done was to manage an interview between Florence Leigh and Mrs. Staples ; for here was a difficulty. Florence knew, as did all the girls, that it was against the rules to leave the boundary hedge of the garden. In order to bring about this interview, Isabel was obliged to have another private conversation with the old woman, at the cost of another half-crown ; and, at an hour then arranged, upon the following afternoon, as Florence had walked close to the hedge with Isabel, a succession of short coughs was heard.

‘Why, what is that?’ said Isabel, as if startled by the sound.

‘It seems like some one on the other side of the hedge,’ Florence answered. ‘How could any one have got there? I will go to the corner and see.’

‘No, no ; pray don’t,’ said Isabel, catching her by the arm. ‘It might be a tramp.’

But Florence was already running to the corner she had spoken of, and Isabel, as if with reluctance, followed her. They could see distinctly, crouching under the hedge, the figure of a woman.

‘What do you want here?’ asked Florence, in a loud voice. ‘What business have you in this field? If you don’t go away directly, I will summon the lady of the house, and have you turned out.’

‘Hush, Florence, perhaps she may be insolent to you. Oh! it is Mrs. Staples; and she is crying, poor old thing!’ said Isabel.

Florence changed her tone in a moment, as she saw the cunning old woman hold her dirty-coloured handkerchief to her face, and she said—

‘Come nearer. What is the matter with you? You ought not to be here at all, you know. What have you to say, Mrs. Staples?’

Mrs. Staples had been well schooled, for the first thing she said, after rapidly drying her eyes, was—

‘Well, I am sure I am glad to my heart to see your pretty face once more, Miss Howard; it is a long long time since I have seen you.’

‘You know, Mrs. Staples,’ answered Isabel, demurely, ‘that we have resolved to buy nothing more without Mrs. Toogood’s permission. It was very thoughtless and wrong of us to encourage you as we did; but we hope we shall do so no more.’

Mrs. Staples gave a very prolonged sigh, approaching to a groan, as she answered, with a slow shake of the head—

‘Oh ! you are a good young lady, and allus was, Miss Howard ; and I am sure I wouldn’t be the one to temp’ you into breaking of Mrs. Toogood’s orders ; but it do come hard on a honest woman, who has but her little tarts and bits of things, and what not, whereby to make a living—it *do* come hard, Miss Howard !’

And Mrs. Staples wept afresh, or rather feigned to weep. She was an old woman, and Florence Leigh felt sorry for her, so she gave her a shilling.

‘Bless you !’ said Mrs. Staples enthusiastically. ‘Bless your kind, pretty face ! May you never know what it is to want a crust ! Hunger is a sharp thorn, my dear.’

‘Are you so poor, then ?’ asked Florence, in some surprise, looking at the dress of the speaker.

‘Poor ! that I am, missy. Not that I need be, if just debts was paid. But it isn’t every one with a pretty face as considers the dues of the poor tart-woman, though I wouldn’t be the one to be saying nought again the absent ; which *some* people they don’t pay for things as they has.’

‘I don’t quite understand you,’ said Florence Leigh ; and it was no wonder, seeing how ambiguous Mrs. Staples’ mode of expression was.

‘Law ! p’raps she may be a friend of yourn, my dear ; and I wouldn’t be the one for to separate between you, not if it was ever so,’ said the old woman again.

‘I hope I have no friends who do not pay their debts,’ said Florence haughtily.

And Isabel added—

‘If you have anything to say, Mrs. Staples, I think you

had better say it out at once. Neither Miss Leigh nor myself like these hints, which may mean nothing.'

Florence was fixedly looking at the ground ; and the old tart-woman, seeing her attention was diverted, deliberately winked her eye at Isabel, then recommenced her chatter.

'As to having anything to say, Miss Howard, you ought to know as well as me, as some of our young ladies don't pay as they ought to pay, and buys things as they shouldn't ought to buy of a poor, lone widdy, with a young family of children.'

This young family was a very recent invention on the part of Mrs. Staples ; even Isabel Howard had not heard of it before.

'I really cannot be answerable for the honour of any of the other girls, Mrs. Staples,' said Isabel coldly.

'Now, don't 'ee be cross with your Staples, my dear,' said the old woman. 'I never blamed you, I'm sure, for the thousandth part of a minute. It is Miss Astley I was a-speaking of, and no one else.'

As the woman mentioned Theodora's name, Florence Leigh started, and winced. She had not expected so soon a fresh attack upon her absent friend ; but she was silent. Isabel was watching her keenly, and came in at this juncture.

'There, that will do,' said she ; 'we do not want to hear what you may have to say about Miss Astley. That will do, my good woman ; Miss Astley is not here now ; she is gone home.'

‘Then it’s a shame, and a sin, and nothing else—that’s what I calls it!’ said Mrs Staples, who was a more apt pupil than even Isabel had expected,—‘to go away, and leave her debts unpaid. She ain’t no lady—that she ain’t! It’s a shame!’

‘Does Miss Astley owe you any money, then?’ asked Florence Leigh stiffly.

‘Owe me money!’ said the woman, spreading abroad her hands at the innocence of her question, ‘owe me money! Why, my dearie, wherever do you think she got all that cotton that she was for ever a-twiddling and a-twisting, and never an ’apenny paid for it?’

Isabel Howard opened her eyes, as much in admiration as surprise, at the cunning of the old woman; but she overrated her cunning. Mrs. Staples had really not been paid for a great deal of the cotton which had been bought of her, through the want of honesty of Letitia Jones, who had invariably received the money for it from Theodora; and she thought it a good opportunity for imposing upon Florence Leigh, so as to get the whole of it paid to her, both that which she had received, and that still owing.

‘How much does she owe you?’ asked Florence Leigh again.

‘Which it is four shillings and tenpence, my dear, if you will believe me,’ said rapidly Mrs. Staples.

Florence opened her purse, took from it the money, and placed it in Mrs. Staples’ hand, then turned away from her, and walked up the garden path.

'Was that right, my dearie?' asked the old woman in a whisper of Isabel.

'Yes, yes ; quite right. Go now—go directly. Bring twelve raspberry tarts and twelve cheesecakes to-morrow at this time ; not here—at the other place, you know. Go now.' And Isabel waved her hand impatiently.

Mrs. Staples nodded, and moved away.

'She's a deep 'un,' she murmured, as she looked after Isabel. 'However, I've made three shillings by the job, for it was only one-and-tenpence as the other one owed me.'

Isabel ran after Florence ; but the latter seemed disinclined to talk. She said decidedly that she would sooner be alone. She could think but of one thing, and she did not wish to speak of it.

She thought of that moment when she had taken up Theodora's reel of tatting cotton, in the days of their newly-awakened friendship, and had asked her how much she gave for it, and Theodora had answered her, adding, 'Letitia Jones gets it for me ;' and then Theodora had blushed, and, at the time, Florence had speculated in her own mind as to the reason of her blushing. 'It must have been because she knew it was not paid for. How could she do it? But then, a girl who would betray confidence as she betrayed mine, would be capable of any other dishonourable action,' argued Florence. Thus one falsehood appeared to strengthen the other ; and Florence Leigh determined in her own mind that from that time Theodora Astley should be nothing to her. Her pride and her indignation at having been, as she supposed, de-

ceived in the girl, bore her up against the pain of giving up her friend. Florence was very enthusiastic, and she had dreamt of a lifelong friendship with Theodora ; but now that was all at an end. There was no other girl in the school with whom she could be very intimate, for Isabel Howard was not in many things suited to her tastes ; but she must bear that, it would not be very long ; she was placed at Mrs. Toogood's only for a year, and during that time she could manage to live alone.





## CHAPTER XXV.

The meeting again with Florence Leigh—Her haughty treatment of Theodora—She avoids an explanation with Theodora—Florence takes refuge in greater intimacy with Isabel—‘Evil communications corrupt good manners.’

**S**O, when Theodora was able to leave her mother, and return to Mrs. Toogood’s establishment, she was met in a way that she little expected. She did not hope for friendliness from Isabel Howard, who had from the very first treated her with unkindness ; but she had ever, during her brief holiday, looked forward to meeting again with Florence Leigh, and renewing the happy intercourse of the last three months. She had talked of, praised, rhapsodized of Florence Leigh to her mother and to Mr. Morgan, and even to little Edith ; and it was with a quickly beating heart that she reached the door of Prospect House, and was admitted to the hall.

Mrs. Toogood opened the door of the drawing-room as Theodora entered the house, and, seeing her, she stopped. It was a half-holiday, so that the lady had the afternoon at her own disposal.

She seemed at first as if she were going to step forward

to welcome Theodora ; but she checked herself, if that had been her impulse.

‘ My dear Miss Astley,’ said she, ‘ I am glad to see you back again. I trust you left Mrs. Astley in better health.’

‘ Thank you, ma’am, she is much better. You are very kind. I am glad to come back also, for some reasons,’ added Theodora.

‘ Indeed !’ said Mrs. Toogood, with a look of surprise, but at the same time feeling pleased at Theodora’s admission. ‘ I suppose it would be rude to ask your reasons.’

‘ Oh, dear, no,’ Theodora answered ; ‘ I think it is so kind of you, Mrs. Toogood, to take any interest in me.’ Theodora was beginning to like the old lady better than she ever dreamed she could, in those first days of her arrival. ‘ I am glad to come back, chiefly because of Florence Leigh.’

Mrs. Toogood remarked, ‘ Are you and Miss Leigh great friends then, Miss Astley ?’

‘ I never loved any girl as I love Florence Leigh, ma’am ; and I know she loves me in return.’

‘ Then I will not detain you from her, my dear,’ said Mrs. Toogood. The next moment I think she checked herself for the unwonted familiarity of her address, and she became again stiff and formal. ‘ Miss Leigh is a young lady in every way suited for moving in the most refined circles,’ said Mrs. Toogood. ‘ You must be careful not to presume upon her kindness, Miss Astley.’

Theodora flushed with annoyance at the speech. It had never occurred to her that Florence Leigh showed any

condescension in being intimate with herself, for she knew she was a lady as well-born as Florence Leigh, although in position she was a school teacher. Her old pride and self-sufficiency very nearly burst out in words ; for she had not that worst of all pride, the pride which apes humility, and which might have induced her to underrate her own advantages of birth. Mrs. Toogood watched the girl's face, and wondered what conflict was going on in her mind, which was so ingenuously betrayed in her changing colour. Mrs. Toogood was not a gentlewoman by birth. She was the daughter of a tradesman, and the widow of a village schoolmaster, and had, commencing with a dame school, gradually increased her establishment, and improved her class of pupils, always keeping the best and highest masters, and a first-class second teacher, such as Miss Terry. She did not, because she could not, understand what she had said to cause Theodora Astley's annoyance ; so she quickly dismissed her, with a renewal of that formality which she considered a requisite in the manners of the head of Prospect House.

‘ May I request that you will come here after tea this evening, Miss Astley ? I have a little matter whereon I am desirous of speaking with you.’

Theodora said, ‘ Certainly, ma'am,’ and escaped. She ran upstairs to the schoolroom. According to the rules of the school, she should have gone first to her own room to disencumber herself of her walking things ; but in her excitement she forgot the rules and opened the schoolroom door. She glanced rapidly round the room,

and almost started as she at a glance saw the state of things. Scattered in groups about the room, as the girls were, it was one group that fixed the attention of Theodora. The centre of it was Florence Leigh, who was engaged in reading aloud. Isabel Howard, with one arm leaning on Florence's shoulders, was looking over the book ; while Sarah Hawkhurst and Lucy Watson sat by, engaged in some fancy needlework. Isabel had been working, but her work had dropped upon Florence's lap. Every now and then there was a burst of laughter from all of the girls, as something in the book amused them. Theodora could not have told in words in what it was, but Florence seemed changed. Evil communications, even in this short space of time, had corrupted her manners. Theodora had opened the schoolroom door with the intention of throwing herself into Florence's arms ; yet, when she saw her, she stood still and did not advance a step beyond the entrance. Was it the close proximity of Isabel Howard to Florence which checked her? She felt inclined to softly close the door again, and go to her own room before any one had seen her ; but even as the thought of doing so had passed through her mind, Sarah Hawkhurst looked up, and exclaimed in her rough way—

‘Hullo ! if there isn't the saint !’

Then Florence Leigh glanced from her book and saw Theodora, and coloured crimson, but did not rise to meet her ; and Isabel Howard gave a short, contemptuous laugh, and stared full in her face.

'Florence,' said Theodora, walking to the spot where she sat,—'Florence, do not you see I am come back? Are you not glad to see me?'

'I see you are come back, Miss Astley,' replied Florence Leigh. 'I wish you had not done so; I wish you had never come here at all.'

'I do not understand you,' said Theodora, looking in a confused manner from one to the other. 'I cannot think what you mean. Are you joking, Florence?—you must be. You cannot mean that we are no longer friends?'

'Hear her impudence!' remarked Lucy Watson. 'She still goes on "Florenceing" Miss Leigh. She is not to be put down. It is always the way with those kind of people; give them an inch and they'll take an ell.'

Theodora paid no regard to Lucy Watson's speech, but looked still at Florence Leigh.

'How am I to understand this?' she asked. 'What have I done to deserve being treated in this way?'

'If your own conscience does not tell you what you have done, it must be a very dull one,' answered Florence.

'My conscience tells me of no offence against you, Florence,' said Theodora, the tears rising to her eyes.

'May I request that you will discontinue calling me by my Christian name, Miss Astley?'

Theodora's colour rose in anger as she said, 'I insist upon knowing the cause of this change in you. Who has set you against me in my absence? But I can easily guess,' she added, as she caught the triumphant expres-

sion of Isabel Howard's face. 'It is very cruel. I tell you my conscience acquits me. You must explain, or I cannot understand.'

'I shall explain nothing,' said Florence haughtily.

She was behaving with great folly, but she mistook it for dignity; and the crowd of girls thought the same, for they shouted—

'That's right! of course you won't explain; as if she didn't know better than you do what you mean!'

Theodora turned away. At least this, she felt, was no time or place for pressing for an explanation. She did not intend to portray in her face the contempt she could not help feeling for the weak vanity of Florence, which had led her away so as to feel pleasure in the adulation of these girls—the very same flattery which she had despised when given to Isabel Howard, and for the girls themselves, who could echo without reason anything said by one of their leaders. I wonder if Theodora, in her turn, might have been led away had she been subjected to the temptation? As she walked to the door, she was followed by the loud comments of the spectators.

'Law! can't she curl up her lip and cock her nose? Ain't she dignified and contemptuous? I wouldn't look so grand if I were a saint. Saints ought to be humble; they ought to like being cut.'

There had been a time when such language, applied to Theodora, would have roused all Florence Leigh's virtuous indignation, and have brought out a vehement defence; but now she went no further than to say—

‘There, that’s enough ; she is only one against all of us, you know. Don’t be too hard upon her, Isabel.’

This was said apologetically ; for Florence’s newly-acquired popularity was dear to her, and, as yet, she felt insecure in the possession of it.

‘She deserves it, Florence,’ answered Isabel. ‘There’s nothing so bad as treachery.’

Theodora paused at the door for a moment at the word last used ; but remonstrance would have been useless, and she made her way to her own room, feeling confused and dizzy. When there, she sat down upon the edge of the bed, and tried to think what she could have done to have caused this change in Florence Leigh. She had so loved and trusted the girl from the first, it seemed hard that a trial of this sort should come through her. She had looked forward to her return to Prospect House, weighing the hardships and the drudgery of her position as nothing against being with Florence again. A friendship between two girls of seventeen is so engrossing, so romantic, so thorough.

Theodora, in her simplicity, unconscious of her own attractions, had made Florence’s beauty an extra inducement to her love. And now, all was at an end. Isabel Howard had come between them in her absence, and had, in some way, set Florence against her. It was shabby and mean of Florence to believe anything against her friend. Theodora would not have so acted in her place ; and, in the first moments of her injured pride, Theodora thought she would be content to let matters

remain where they were—let Florence be chief friends with Isabel Howard, if such a friendship suited her.

But she was miserable at heart at the change in her friend ; and she had learnt where alone such misery can find relief, so that she knelt upon her knees by the bedside, and told God all that had distressed and disturbed her ; and when she rose, she had determined to seek an interview with Florence alone, away from the influence of Isabel Howard, and the scoffs and ridicule of the other girls.

One would have thought such an interview easy enough to obtain ; but Florence studiously avoided it, so that it was some days before Theodora could even attempt to speak to her alone. By that time Florence's stiffness of manner had communicated itself to Theodora, and it was with very little warmth that she said—

‘Oh, I have found you at last by yourself. I have been wishing for the opportunity, as I must have an explanation of the sudden change in your conduct to me.’

‘I do not wish for any explanation,’ said Florence, looking very uncomfortable ; ‘explanations can only make things worse.’

‘They cannot make them worse than they are,’ Theodora answered ; ‘and you owe it at least to me. Tell me —what have I done? I don’t want to be told anything about my own conscience, Florence, for I have said before that my conscience explains nothing. What has Isabel Howard been saying about me? for I know it is she is at the bottom of it all.’

‘You choose to take that for granted,’ said Florence Leigh; ‘but you are mistaken. Isabel Howard has said nothing against you. I have myself found out your deceit and treachery, and I—I regret that I have been deceived in you.’

‘Deceit and treachery!’ exclaimed Theodora, angrily. ‘Florence Leigh, you have no right to say such a thing of me without proof. You have no right to turn against me in my absence. But you are a false friend. Don’t talk of treachery! The only treachery there has been is on your part! You have believed some falsehood of me, on the word of another girl. I wouldn’t have so acted to you in your absence. It shows how much your professions were worth,’ concluded Theodora, bitterly.

It was a pity that she added that last sentence, for it immediately put Florence out of temper, and she retorted—

‘I suppose the word of one person is worth about as much as that of another, even if I had, as you say, believed a falsehood against you on the word of Isabel Howard; but I think I have told you more than once that Isabel Howard has not spoken against you to me. You have betrayed my confidence in you; you have repeated things which I never would have told you had I thought you capable of doing so. You have acted dishonestly.’

‘Stop!’ exclaimed Theodora, ‘that’s quite enough. I do not wish to hear any more untruths of what I have done. Everything you have said is false.’

‘Theodora Astley!’

‘I repeat it,’ said Theodora; ‘if you are capable of

believing such things of me, you are no friend for me, any more than I should be a friend for you were I capable of doing them. I am glad you did not ask any explanation. You have shown yourself very unworthy, Florence Leigh ; and much more fitted to be intimate with Isabel Howard than with me.'

'Upon my word, you seem to have a good opinion of yourself, Miss Astley !'

Theodora's old weakness was rearing its head. She was very angry, and she left the room without further words. Florence Leigh could not but feel that she had had the worst of the encounter. She was uncomfortable and uneasy in her own conscience ; so, in order to relieve it, she became more intimate than ever with Isabel and the rest, more boisterous even than they were in her spirits ; and I think her father would have been rather sadly surprised at the alteration for the worse in his once lady-like daughter, had he entered suddenly when Florence was joining so heartily in some of the rather questionable tricks of the school-girls.

It only shows us how easily and how quickly we may deteriorate in character by association with those who are lax in principle, and low in their standard of honour. It was not for nothing that Solomon told us we cannot touch pitch without being defiled ; and that St. Paul quoted from the poet, ' Evil communications corrupt good manners.' What had become now of Florence Leigh's boast, that she supposed she could influence the school for good, as easily as Isabel Howard could sway it towards evil?



## CHAPTER XXVI.

Mrs. Toogood shows great kindness to Theodora—Mrs. Toogood in her true character—A blow for Miss Terry—Florence Leigh finds it hard to keep her popularity—She makes a step towards a reconciliation—Alfred enters a training ship.



N the evening of her return to Prospect House, Theodora attended Mrs. Toogood in the drawing-room, as she had been desired to do. She found that lady seated at her solitary tea-table.

‘Sit down, Miss Astley,’ said Mrs. Toogood, ‘and let me give you a cup of tea.’

Theodora saw that a second cup had been placed upon the tray, as if she had been expected; so she complied with her mistress’s request, thinking that her present reception was somewhat of a contrast to that of the first evening of her arrival, when, in that same room, she had so grievously offended Miss Terry.

‘Now,’ commenced Mrs. Toogood, ‘if I may do so without appearing impertinent, I should wish to inquire about your mother, Miss Astley, and also if anything has been settled relative to your sister Gertrude.’

Mrs. Toogood had a wonderful memory for names. Theodora gladly told her unreservedly all about her home ; and, from one thing to the other, was led on until Mrs. Toogood was acquainted with all the family circumstances since the time of Mr. Astley's death.

'Your mother must find it very difficult to live upon two hundred a year with six children at home. It is a shame that your sister should not be more alive to the importance of relieving Mrs. Astley, at least, if she cannot help towards her support.'

Theodora was silent. The subject of Gertrude was one which always irritated her, and she was afraid of speaking too strongly if she spoke at all.

'I suppose, of course, that such a motive influenced you, Miss Astley, in leaving home?' said Mrs. Toogood.

'Yes, ma'am,' Theodora answered.

Mrs. Toogood was silent for a while, and sipped her tea in a precise manner, leaving Theodora an opportunity of doing the same. When she had sipped away the whole cupful, she looked up and said—

'Miss Astley, I have been several times lately thinking of giving you a small salary. Of course, at first, it would be but small ; but I should increase it, subject to your conduct and increased efficiency. From this date you will consider yourself entitled to receive from me the sum of ten pounds yearly.'

Theodora had been looking full in the face of Mrs. Toogood as she spoke, her eyes getting larger and larger, and filling gradually with tears, until, at the climax of the

old lady's speech, she rose from her seat, and placing her head upon Mrs. Toogood's knee, she sobbed aloud.

I do not suppose that in all the long years of the schoolmistress's experience she had ever found herself in such a situation, with the face of a weeping under teacher buried in the folds of her apron. If Miss Terry could but have entered!

'My dear Miss Astley,' commenced Mrs. Toogood, 'pray control yourself.' But finding that conventional expressions did not avail, and probably following for once the natural warmth of her heart, Mrs. Toogood proceeded, 'Don't cry, there's a good girl; it is no more than your due. Why, my dear, I'm not quite blind and deaf, though I am a schoolmistress.'

'You are very, very kind,' said Theodora, reseating herself; 'and I am sorry I was so foolish as to cry in this way. I wish I did not cry so easily.'

'You are still very genuine and very unaffected; perhaps it may be no matter for regret,' said Mrs. Toogood. 'Now, let me give you another cup of tea. No?—well! Make my best compliments to your mother, whenever you should be writing home; and now, perhaps, you had best return to the schoolroom, you may have duties to perform.'

Theodora thanked her again, and left her. Mrs. Toogood's kindness, following upon the injustice of the girls, had quite overcome her; and as she slowly found her way to the schoolroom, she felt very much disposed to cry again. Ten pounds a year seemed to her an immense

salary ; a noble portion to earn by her own exertions—that was the sweetest part of it. And Mrs. Toogood ! Poor old prim lady, who seemed to have so little sympathy with what was fresh and natural, pushed away her teacup, after Theodora had left the room, and leant her head upon her hand. She thought of her own girlhood, so long passed away, and, later, of the years when, still young, she had first begun to struggle with the world and to strive to earn her living, and the tears forced themselves through her fingers and dropped upon the tea-tray. She had lived for many many years in a crowded house ; but she had kept aloof from the young people who surrounded her, as if it were part of her necessary position and dignity to be stiff and precise ; and hitherto the girls had kept aloof from her, supposing that Mrs. Toogood could take no further interest in them beyond paying a certain and very limited amount of attention to their studies. And perhaps she had not, until the precise formal manner had grown into a habit and a second nature ; but there was something in Theodora Astley which, from the first night, had interested her. Mrs. Toogood could not have said whence it arose ; but she had watched her more narrowly than Theodora had had the slightest idea of—watched her at times listening to and helping on the little ones, or toiling at her incessant task of stockings. She had, as she said, not been quite blind nor quite deaf.

As Theodora went on her way to the schoolroom she encountered Miss Terry, and was met with the question,

‘Well, Miss Astley, I should wish to know where you have been?’

‘I have been with Mrs. Toogood,’ answered Theodora.

‘Not all this time. Impossible, Miss Astley; for I saw Mrs. Toogood’s tea-tray carried in some time since,’ returned Miss Terry. ‘Where can you have been whilst Mrs. Toogood took her tea?’

‘I was with her,’ said Theodora, scarcely able to avoid smiling at the consternation she knew would be depicted in the face of Miss Terry at the announcement. ‘Mrs. Toogood very kindly asked me to have a cup of tea with her.’

‘You!—a cup of tea!’ gasped Miss Terry; ‘I can scarcely credit it. But,’ recovering herself, ‘it is like Mrs. Toogood’s goodness. Such condescension! such affability!’

‘Yes; she is very kind indeed,’ said Theodora. ‘I am sure I have reason to say so; no one could be kinder.’

Miss Terry did not seem to half like it, and she stopped several times as she passed down stairs, and shook her head as if things were doubtful.

‘What would she say if she heard of the ten pounds?’ thought Theodora; ‘but there is no need to tell her of that. I am so happy! God has been very good to me in giving me a friend in Mrs. Toogood. I will write to Alfred this evening about it. He is always laughing at her name, and now he will find that she deserves it.’

It was very lonely for Theodora now at Prospect House. The party against her was stronger than ever.

She tried for no fresh interview with Florence Leigh. She had been hurt in her tenderest point ; for, like many people who are incapable of untruth, she was proud of her own truthfulness, and to charge her with deceit was the greatest insult that could be put upon her. I do not say that Theodora was right ; she was full of faults ; her pride was her weakness. And Florence Leigh was anything but happy. It is true she had many friends ; but she doubted if she had a sincere one amongst them all. In order to maintain her popularity, she had to close her eyes to many things of which her conscience did not approve. She knew that the practices which she had so objected to were carried on as much as before the institution of the club ; indeed the club was a mere name. Eatables, procured from Mrs. Staples, were constantly smuggled into the house ; books, procured Florence did not choose to inquire how, were read aloud upon half-holidays—books which had to be hidden if the door was suddenly opened ; and Florence had, still without inquiry, listened to the reading of these books, and becoming greatly interested in them, had not had the courage to say anything against them. She had become entangled in difficulties, from which she knew not how to escape ; and it seemed to her that her only plan now was to go on in the same course, and brave it out by pretending that she was happy. On half-holidays she often and often envied Theodora, as the latter sat in her solitary corner in the schoolroom at her needlework, or rarely, in more leisure moments, tatting rapidly to put a headstone to her

father's grave. There was no question who was the happier girl of the two; although at first, after her wounded feelings had calmed down, Theodora had felt it very sad and very lonely to have no one to speak to excepting on the matters of the schoolroom. Isabel Howard had probably informed Miss Terry of as much as she pleased of the state of things; for that lady took occasion to congratulate Florence Leigh upon her change of intimacy, a congratulation at which Florence felt more ashamed of herself than obliged to Miss Terry. Another besides Miss Terry saw that there was an alteration in Florence Leigh; for Mrs. Toogood one evening, when several of the older girls, and Florence amongst them, had been invited to drink tea with her, observed to Florence—

‘I don't wish to interfere with young ladies' friendship, Miss Leigh; but it seems to me that you are not so intimate with Miss Astley as you used to be. Miss Astley is a very estimable young woman.’

Florence coloured and gave no answer; and Isabel Howard, who was never at a loss for words, replied for her—

‘Oh, Miss Leigh has found Miss Astley out, ma'am.’

‘I do not understand you, Miss Howard,’ said Mrs. Toogood; ‘but, as I said, I do not wish to interfere in your various friendships.’

All this time the months were passing on, the June holidays were nearly arrived, and Theodora had become so habitually reserved in her manner to most of the girls,

and especially so to Florence Leigh, that she almost emulated Mrs. Toogood ; while Florence, during her intimacy with Isabel Howard, had discovered in her such a complete disregard to truth and want of honour, that her confidence in her friend's statements was greatly shaken. Had all she had heard against Theodora rested upon the word of Isabel, Florence would have been disposed to doubt the whole of it ; but there were Lucy Watson and Sarah Hawkhurst, both of whose statements seemed to confirm what Isabel had said, and then there was the old woman, Mrs. Staples. Florence could not imagine that they were all in league to deceive her. Yet, when she thought over the subject, even if Theodora had been guilty of all of what they had accused her, she was still much less culpable in these very things than her accusers, by their own admission, were themselves ; and if Florence could associate intimately with Isabel Howard, surely Theodora, even with her faults, was a better companion.

‘If I could only get over her treachery to myself,’ mused Florence ; ‘but it was such a shame to repeat that about my poor mother ! It was such a shame !’

Florence, as she thought of it, recalled the moment when she had told it, how she and Theodora had been seated that early spring morning in the summer-house in the garden, and Theodora had asked her companion what made her cry, and how, in a moment of affectionate confidence, Florence had told her of her mother's madness. ‘How could Isabel have known it excepting

through her?' thought Florence; 'for, as we went indoors, at the ringing of the school-bell, we met her just coming from her bedroom, having been lying down with a headache—at least she said so. I wonder if she had! Isabel does tell most dreadful stories; but even if she had not come from her bedroom, she had scarcely had time to leave the garden. I wish I knew! Oh, I wish it had never happened! I wonder if Theodora would speak to me if I go near her!'

Florence crossed the schoolroom, and looked from the window near which Theodora was seated. It was raining hard.

'How it rains!' observed Florence, in a tone which might have been intended either as a soliloquy or as an address to Theodora. The latter gave no sign of having supposed it meant for her. 'Do you mind my opening the window?' asked Florence.

'Not at all,' Theodora answered, without raising her eyes.

Florence leant from the window for a few minutes, feeling inclined to cry; then presently one of the girls in the little room called to her, and she hastily shut down the window, and danced all the way across the schoolroom, singing and keeping time with her feet to the music as if she were the lightest-hearted girl there. But alone in her bed, she cried herself to sleep, as she had many times done since her quarrel with Theodora, little thinking that her former friend was doing exactly the same thing in another room.

During these months Florence received a letter from her father, saying that he found it would be impossible for him to return to England in the space of a twelve-month, as he had at first contemplated, so that Florence's residence at Prospect House would be more prolonged than at first she had expected. How rejoiced Theodora would have been at this news some time before! but now she heard it only indirectly, through one of the little girls.

Alfred Astley also, during this term, left the Naval College at Southsea, and entered on board a training ship; a change with which he of course was greatly delighted, as it involved uniform, which was the first step towards becoming an admiral. Theodora had no one to whom to tell her happiness; no one to rejoice with her over her dear Alfred's advancement; and I am afraid this fact made her shed as many tears over Alfred's letter as if it had contained bad news.





## CHAPTER XXVII.

The school walk—Mrs. Toogood's order to Theodora—What had become of the club rules?—Greenway Common—Theodora's useless opposition—The girls persist in going to Upton—Alarming warning from Mrs. Toogood.

**V**ERYBODY knows the way in which, at boarding-schools, the girls walk out in pairs, usually the most intimate friends falling together by mutual consent, and thus finding another opportunity of indulging in those never-ending confidences in which girls delight. Generally, on these occasions, Miss Terry wound up the double file accompanied by some select companion, her choice for the day; chosen as an especial favour, but usually submitted to by the victim with a great many grimaces behind Miss Terry's back. Theodora Astley would lead the van, accompanied by one of the smaller children. Formerly Florence Leigh had been in the habit of walking with her; but now all this was changed. Florence and Isabel were walking companions; and Theodora would take little Bertha Lloyd, who had always continued

her firm little friend, and who was never tired of hearing her talk of Edith and Alice, Willy, Georgy, and the baby.

Now it happened, on a very hot day this summer, that Miss Terry did not feel very well, or at least she was indisposed for walking, and excused herself to Mrs. Toogood. This latter lady seemed to think it a pity so fine a day should be lost; and summoning Theodora to her sitting-room, she, in the presence of Miss Terry, mentioned that lady's indisposition, Miss Terry enforcing the idea by immediately placing her handkerchief to her forehead and giving forth a groan.

'I know I can trust you, Miss Astley,' observed Mrs. Toogood, 'to enforce my wishes upon the young ladies. I only wish to remind you under no circumstances whatever to leave your charge.'

Miss Terry gave a sniff, indicative of the fact that *she*, under the same circumstances, would not be at all disposed to trust Theodora; but Mrs. Toogood merely glanced at her, and Theodora took no notice whatever, but keeping her attention fixed upon Mrs. Toogood, she answered—

'I will endeavour to do so, ma'am. I promise you, in any case, I will not leave the young ladies.'

She could not help wondering why Mrs. Toogood had even dreamt of her leaving the girls under her charge; but she supposed rightly that it was through some suggestion on the part of Miss Terry that such an idea had occurred to their superior.

There was something comical in a girl of Theodora's age being sent out in charge of other girls as old and some of them bigger than herself; it was like what we sometimes see—a baby of four or five carrying a fat baby of two, who flows over on all sides of its nurse, and seems larger than the child who carries it. Perhaps some such idea occurred to Mrs. Toogood, for she said—

‘You had best go across Greenway Common and nowhere else, Miss Astley. It seems a pity to lose so lovely a day as it is; and I am sure the young ladies will comport themselves with decorum.’

Theodora left Mrs. Toogood's presence with the sound of Miss Terry's purring approval of that lady's sentiments in her ears; and, upon entering the schoolroom, she announced—

‘Miss Terry has a headache, or some other ache, and cannot go out walking; and Mrs. Toogood says, I am to go in her place; so, will you please all get ready?’

‘There's a new head teacher!’ exclaimed Sarah Hawkurst. ‘I shouldn't wonder if she were to take Terry's place altogether, after a bit. So she's to take care of us innocent chickens out walking! I say, Howard, isn't that fun?’

And Sarah Hawkurst made to Theodora a deep mocking curtsey, which was followed up by every girl almost in the schoolroom.

Florence Leigh, however, declared her intention of remaining at home. Such a choice was allowed to girls as old as herself; and Theodora hoped that Isabel

Howard might follow her example, and remain with her new friend ; but Isabel showed no such inclination. She skipped off to her room to prepare for walking, saying first, 'Hawkhurst, you and I will walk together.'

The rule of the club, like many other of its rules, against calling the girls by their surnames, had fallen almost into oblivion ; and Florence Leigh, although the habit still jarred as much as ever upon her sense of what was refined and ladylike, was too much a coward to protest openly against the practice ; and even in private her objections were now so faint that no one hesitated, not even her friend Isabel Howard, in breaking the club rules in her presence. The paper upon which they had been so carefully written, with so much form and appearance of business, had even been displaced from the wall where it had been hung, and Theodora came across it one day thrown aside in one of the general lockers of the schoolroom. She could not help hanging it up in its old place, where it remained for the school hours as a silent reproach to Florence Leigh, whom Theodora suspected as the culprit who eventually removed and destroyed it, for Theodora never saw it again.

The procession of girls, headed by Isabel Howard and Sarah Hawkhurst, and wound up by Theodora and a little one, left Prospect House in a very orderly way ; for Mrs. Toogood was watching their departure from the drawing-room window.

'Across Greenway Common,' Theodora had said, as the girls passed her two and two.

Isabel Howard looked back and laughed impudently, and said, 'Very well, ma'am; thank you, ma'am,' and then she and Sarah Hawkurst had whispered and giggled together; so that Theodora had an uncomfortable feeling at starting.

Before coming to Greenway Common, there were cross roads, one of which led straight into the neighbouring town, which was about a mile from Prospect House, and was called Upton. Theodora had almost forgotten the whispering and giggling of the elder girls by the time they arrived at these cross roads; and she was quite unprepared for a sudden stop on the part of Isabel Howard and her companion, and the declaration—

'We are going into the town. We shan't have such an opportunity again. It is of no use your saying anything, Astley, for you are nobody; you are only an under scrub; and we shall none of us obey you.'

Theodora walked to where Isabel stood.

'Miss Howard,' said she, 'it is not I whom you have to attend to; but, remember, I am in Miss Terry's place, and Mrs. Toogood has ordered me to go across Greenway Common, and nowhere else. I beg of you to obey her orders.'

'You may obey her orders, if you are so particular. You can walk across Greenway Common all by yourself for the rest of the afternoon; but we shall do as we please, which is to go into the town,' and Isabel shouted with laughter.

Her shout was rudely echoed by Sarah Hawkurst and

the Carters, and presently afterwards taken up and repeated more timidly by some of the others.

‘Do you think we are going to lose such a chance as this,’ resumed Isabel, ‘when it is so seldom that we get one? I have half a dozen things to do in the town; so, who follows me? I’ll be missus this afternoon. Come, young ladies, fall into rank, and let us enjoy the air this genial afternoon,’ concluded she, imitating the voice of Miss Terry.

‘Isabel!’ exclaimed Theodora, ‘do be persuaded for once. You know I shall be obliged in duty to tell Mrs. Toogood of it, if you will go.’

‘Duty! Fine idea of duty you have, I must say!’ said Sarah Hawkhurst. ‘You always find these very good people are so fond of their duty, when it is a disagreeable one for other people. As if it could ever be a duty to blab about other people, and get them into a scrape.’

‘She may blab till her tongue tumbles off, for all I care,’ said Isabel, with her usual elegance of language. ‘Who would believe her? I should declare that we had been the whole afternoon picking daisies on the Common; and I know I can trust all you girls to stick to me,’ said Isabel, looking round, ‘you would none of you betray a friend.’

There was a murmur throughout the party. What strange ideas of truth and honour these girls had acquired!

‘Well, then, I go to the town,’ concluded Isabel. ‘As for Saint Theodora, she may remain with the daisies; and let those who will, stop with her. And mind you, little

ones, if any one of you says I have been into the town, it will be the worse for you : you understand me.'

'If you persist in going to Upton, I shall go with you,' said Theodora, who had, during the last few minutes, been deliberating what she ought to do. 'The last thing almost that Mrs. Toogood charged me was, that I was *not* to leave you.'

Isabel tossed her head and marched off in the direction of the town, followed by everybody else. She had not wished for Theodora's company, and had hoped that the latter would have remained on the Common, but she could not prevent her going to the town also. Isabel marched straight up the street, until she came to a shop which was a conjoined library and fancy repository. It was impossible for all the girls to go into the shop, and Theodora had to remain outside with the most of them. She could hear Isabel and Sarah Hawkhurst inquiring about various volumes of novels which they had apparently been reading, and the shopman recommending different books as 'just the style' to suit the inquirers ; and Theodora could not help wondering how Isabel and the others had contrived, so frequently, to procure books for reading without the knowledge of Mrs. Toogood. It seemed a long time to Theodora while she waited outside the shop, and she feared that they would add to Mrs. Toogood's annoyance by being home late for tea. At last Isabel and her companions came out, each bearing something suspiciously like books under her arm, and the whole party began to walk home. Theodora was puzzled what to do. She did

not wish to be that most unpleasant of all characters, however actuated by duty—an informer against the rest of the girls. She walked home in silence, trying to make up her mind what she ought really to do. She might never have to walk out alone with the girls again; for this was the first time she had done so since she had been at Prospect House, and there might never again be an opportunity of her authority being questioned as it had been to-day. Surely it would be time enough to tell if she had again to take entire charge of the girls. Besides, if she told, would she, as Isabel had said, be believed against the testimony of the whole party? Theodora had not now to learn of what falsehood Isabel Howard was capable, and she knew her influence over the other girls. They arrived at home, and the question was still unsettled in Theodora's mind. On the stair-landing they met the housemaid crying violently, with her handkerchief to her eyes.

‘Why, what’s the matter, Elizabeth?’ asked Isabel, who was a favourite, and very intimate with all the servants.

‘Oh, Miss Howard, it’s my brother which is dead in scarlet fever this very evening, which I’ve only heard of it but now, Miss; and he taken ill not a week till come next Thursday. ‘Tis awful sudden, and he that hearty and strong! You’d a thought he been the last man as ever would,’ and the woman sobbed and cried afresh.

‘I am very sorry, Lizzy,’ said Isabel, kindly.

‘And what’s the worst, Miss Howard?’ resumed Elizabeth, ‘I can’t go for to be with ‘em, nor nothing, for they

say as the fever is that malignant. Oh, Miss Isabel !' exclaimed the woman, suddenly catching sight of the parcel protruding from under Isabel's arm, 'you don't go to say you've a been in the town ! Oh dear ! oh dear ! and Fever a-walking abroad as it were, arm-in-arm with Death.'

Whether this latter poetical aphorism was original or not, I cannot say ; in either case Elizabeth seemed gratified with the result of it, for she made more than one use of it.

Isabel changed colour ; the pink in her cheeks suddenly died out, and did not return. Theodora could not help feeling sorry for her evident alarm. 'I only went to Howell's,' said she, 'for some more books.'

'The very worstest of all places ; the very worstest. Oh ! Miss Isabel. You've agone into the very emporium of the disease ; which my own poor brother he lived but next door to Howell's, as I've a told you often and often, Miss Howard ; and they do say as Howell's own children is sickening for the same.'

'I wish I hadn't gone,' said Isabel.

'Indeed and indeed I wish as you hadn't,' said Elizabeth, acting the part of Eliphaz the Temanite ; 'indeed and indeed I wish as you hadn't, Miss Howard ; but now, least said soonest mended ; don't you go for to tell nobody now as you have been, for they say the fright that kills may be as much as the disease. I am glad the little ones was gone by before I told you, or they'd have spread it about the house ; and as to you, young ladies,' said Eliza-

beth, looking round upon the select few to whom she had been addressing herself, 'you are old enough to know when to hold your tongues, I hope.'

But the subject was not destined to rest there. After a time Mrs. Toogood entered the room, where all were seated at the various tables, busy with the thick bread and butter which had seemed so uneatable to Theodora on the first evening of her arrival. This was a most unusual occurrence, and portended something of importance. All the girls stood up, as was the custom, on the entrance of their schoolmistress ; and Mrs. Toogood, after having acknowledged this piece of deference on their part by an approving bow and smile, addressed them—

' Young ladies, I take this opportunity of you all being together, to warn you against imprudence in the way of communication with the town. As you are aware, all such communication without my knowledge is against the orders of my establishment ; but, perhaps, some of you may not have been hitherto so strict as you should have been in carrying out these orders. Let me beg of you, from henceforth, to be more than ever cautious ; for it has come to my knowledge this afternoon that scarlatina of a very malignant kind is in Upton. I have given directions that the postman should not, as usual, bring the letters to the house, but that they should be left in a box placed within the gates. I shall see that they are properly fumigated before being given into your hands. May I request that you will not hold intercourse with any one coming from the town, upon any pretence what-

ever?' Mrs. Toogood ceased; while most of the girls answered almost mechanically, 'Yes, ma'am; ' but Sarah Hawkhurst whispered to her next door neighbour—

'What does she mean? I believe she has found out something about Mother Staples.'





## CHAPTER XXVIII.

Isabel Howard throws herself upon Theodora's generosity—Isabel's ideas of 'cleverness' and friendship—She tries to bribe Theodora to silence—Bertha Lloyd is taken with fever—Terror of Miss Terry—She is dismissed home—Mrs. Toogood investigates matters.

**T**EODORA was seated alone in the school-room that evening after tea. She thought that every one else was in the garden, and she had resolved to spend the remaining hour of daylight at what the girls called her 'everlasting tatting.' To her surprise, Isabel Howard entered the room. She still looked pale, as she had done since she had heard Elizabeth's news. Theodora imagined she had come in search of something; but Isabel walked from the door to the window, and, after some hesitation, took a seat on the locker by Theodora's side. Presently she began—

'Theodora Astley, what am I to do? If I had had the least idea there was scarlet fever in Upton, I would never have dreamt of going there. I wish to goodness I had never gone. I am so awfully afraid of scarlet fever. I know I shall die if I were to get it. What am I to do?

Mrs. Toogood will be in such a dreadful way if she knows that we have been into the town.'

Theodora did not understand what Isabel wished her to do. She was so much surprised at Isabel's remarkable change of manner to herself, that she could hardly notice the mixture of policy and selfishness in her speech; so she left her to speak again, and so explain herself.

'Why is it absolutely necessary for you to tell Mrs. Toogood?' rejoined Isabel. 'You will get me into an awful mess; for although I said what I did on the Common, I don't know that I can trust the little ones. I never asked you to do anything for me before, Theodora Astley. I wish you would not tell about this, to oblige me.'

Theodora might justly have questioned upon what foundation Isabel could possibly build her right to ask a favour of herself; but as she was not in an ungracious temper, she tried not to feel sarcastic as she answered Isabel—

'I have been thinking the subject over, and am afraid I might do more harm than good by telling Mrs. Toogood. What Elizabeth said this evening has made me think so. In any case, I should alarm Mrs. Toogood very much; and I should be sorry to do that, for she has been very kind to me.'

'Has she?' said Isabel in surprise. 'Of course, then, you would not like to frighten her; you are quite right. I am glad you think so. Then you really won't tell anything about it?'

'No; unless I should be questioned, and that is not likely.'

‘But if you were questioned, you might back out of it, couldn’t you?—you are clever enough.’

‘If you call that cleverness, I daresay I am,’ said Theodora; ‘but the stupidest people can be deceitful. I have said I will say nothing, and I will not, unless I am questioned about it by Mrs. Toogood.’

‘You promise?’ said Isabel.

Theodora was getting annoyed at her requiring so many assurances. ‘What is the use of going on in this way?’ said she. ‘If I can’t keep my word when I have simply said it, should I care any more for promising half a dozen times over?’

Isabel looked dissatisfied; she was so habitually untruthful herself, that she could not believe in the truth of another.

‘I will tell you what,’ said she, presently. ‘If you will stick to me in this matter, Theodora Astley, I will not set the girls against you any more. I will be your friend.’

‘I don’t think you understand the meaning of the word “friend,” Isabel Howard,’ said Theodora.

A few minutes later Isabel was talking earnestly with Sarah Hawkhurst.

‘I can’t make her out,’ said she. ‘I don’t know whether she means to blab or no.’

‘Why, what an idiot you were,’ said Sarah, ‘to say anything to her about it at all! As if we were not a match for the saint, whether she tells or no. I don’t believe she will tell, because she went herself also, not because of her fear of alarming Mrs. Toogood. That’s a good excuse,

I must say ; but if it should leak out, we can but be beforehand with her.'

It did leak out, in this way—that little Bertha Lloyd, just one fortnight after the walk to Upton, showed symptoms of being ill. A doctor was sent for, who immediately declared the child to be sickening for scarlatina, and inquired how she had come in contact with it. Bertha answered that she did not know ; for she was too much afraid of Isabel Howard to tell the truth.

Mrs. Toogood adjourned to her sitting-room, and sent for Miss Terry.

After informing her of the uncomfortable fact, and giving directions for protecting the rest of the scholars, most of whom were to be despatched to their respective homes on the following day, Mrs. Toogood started the question as to how the fever could have been brought into the house.

' It shows the apparent uselessness of precautions,' said she ; ' for I am sure in this case every possible care has been taken. Scarcely any communication has been carried on between the town and the house, and the young ladies have been kept to the grounds. I believe Elizabeth has not ventured to disobey my orders, and go to Upton.'

' Hardly, m'm, I should imagine,' answered Miss Terry, ' so venturesome—ungrateful, I am sure, to so exemplary a mistress.'

' I do not know what else I could have done that I have not done,' observed Mrs. Toogood meditatively.

' Everything, I am sure. Most thoughtful ; usual dis-

crimination and judgment,' murmured Miss Terry, who had become very pale, and was supporting herself by leaning on the back of a chair. Mrs. Toogood had not perceived the change in her companion until this moment. As soon as she did so, she said—

‘Are you ill, Miss Terry? Pray, take a seat; let me offer you a glass of wine.’

Miss Terry’s murmurs were now almost inarticulate. She took the chair, and after one or two unsuccessful efforts to control herself, she burst into a flood of tears. Mrs. Toogood looked alarmed at this most unusual display of emotion, and, hardly knowing what to do, procured a glass of wine, which she held towards the agitated lady.

Miss Terry’s sobs became less uncontrolled, until gradually she subsided into greater calmness, only occasionally shuddering, and wiping her eyes with her pocket handkerchief rolled up into a hard ball.

‘My dear Miss Terry, may I request to be informed what has so agitated you?’ asked Mrs. Toogood, when she found she could safely put a question without bringing on a return of the storm.

‘Forgive me my foolish exhibition of feeling, my dear ma’am,’ said Miss Terry.

‘I cannot account for it,’ said Mrs. Toogood. ‘Was there anything in what I said which may have caused it?’

‘This fearful visitation!’ said Miss Terry, shuddering afresh; ‘this terrible malady!’

Mrs. Toogood was herself accustomed to ‘pick her words;’ but it annoyed her when Miss Terry trench'd

upon her ground. 'Do you mean the scarlatina?' asked she sharply.

'Oh yes! oh yes!' said Miss Terry, beginning to relapse.

'And do you mean to say you are afraid of it, Miss Terry?' asked Mrs. Toogood again, this time with sternness. Whatever faults Mrs. Toogood may have had, she would never have been afraid where her duty was involved; and there was a rising feeling of contempt in her bosom for cowardly Miss Terry. Miss Terry shook her head slowly and sadly, and fetched sobbing sighs at intervals.

'I wish you would say what you do mean,' observed Mrs. Toogood, forgetting all her politeness of expression. 'I confess I cannot understand you. Are you afraid of the scarlatina?'

'I have never had it; it is an *awful* complaint,' said poor Miss Terry.

'Then you had best go home,' observed Mrs. Toogood shortly. 'I have never had it either; but these things are in the hands of God. You had best go home at once, Miss Terry.'

Thus dismissed, Miss Terry thought it best to say nothing more; so she left the drawing-room without even a parting purr; and Mrs. Toogood took from her drawer her daily remembrancer, in order to consult its pages.

Just one fortnight from the date on which she was looking, there was written in the pocketbook: 'Young ladies walked on Greenway Common under charge of Miss Astley; Elizabeth's brother died of the fever; put the establishment under quarantine.' Mrs. Toogood

rang the bell and sent for Theodora ; then immediately afterwards she changed her mind, and went to the schoolroom. The girls were all crowded together in groups, for of course there were no lessons that day. Some were busy putting together a few of their things ; these were the fortunate individuals who were to return home at once. For Florence Leigh, Isabel Howard, and some others, whose parents were abroad, there was no such possibility. Sarah Hawkhurst was talking vehemently as Mrs. Toogood entered ; but she ceased upon seeing who it was who had joined them.

‘ My dear young ladies,’ commenced Mrs. Toogood, ‘ this is a most unfortunate occurrence, as it breaks up our circle in the middle of the term, and puts a stop, for the time being, to our studies.’

The girls did not seem to look at it exactly in this light ; but they tried to look decently concerned. ‘ Let us hope,’ resumed Mrs. Toogood, ‘ that poor little Bertha Lloyd will be the only one who will be visited with the fever ; meanwhile, we must not alarm ourselves unnecessarily. I should wish to know who amongst you here have had scarlet fever already.’

‘ I have,’ said Florence Leigh ; but she was the only one amongst those who were to remain at Prospect House who so answered.

‘ And in the next place,’ said Mrs. Toogood, ‘ can any of you form an idea of how the infection made its way into this house ? I regret having to ask the question. Did you come in contact with any one from Upton, on

the day you walked out to Greenway Common? That was the last occasion on which the young ladies of my establishment took walking exercise away from home.'

She was looking to Isabel Howard as she commenced speaking; but before concluding her speech her eyes wandered towards Theodora, whose changeable complexion, under her scrutiny, turned the brightest crimson. Isabel Howard also saw the blush, as any one might have done, and she frowned and bit her under-lip at Theodora, at which sign the colour of the latter grew deeper still.





## CHAPTER XXIX.

The cunning of Isabel—She is taken ill—Her agony in the prospect of the fever—Mrs. Toogood gives Theodora warning.

‘**M**ISS ASTLEY,’ said Mrs. Toogood in a severe voice, ‘I trust that you did not disobey my orders, and subject the young ladies to this danger?’

Theodora gave no answer; she positively did not know what to say. She knew her first statement would in all probability bring down upon her a storm of contradiction and denial from the others.

‘Your silence is as reprehensible as a denial, Miss Astley,’ said Mrs. Toogood. Then turning to Isabel, she said, ‘I appeal to you, Miss Howard.’

‘Oh, pray do not appeal to me, ma’am,’ said Isabel flippantly. ‘I hate getting other people into hot water. Besides, you know, ma’am, that Miss Astley did not know there was any sickness in the town.’

‘Oh, Isabel, how can you be so mean?’ exclaimed Theodora.

‘Why, have I let out anything?’ asked Isabel with

apparent innocence. 'Oh, Law! what a sieve I am, to be sure! But I never could keep a secret in my life.'

'Miss Astley, I am surprised and disappointed. I had thought better things of you,' said Mrs. Toogood.

'It is not true, ma'am; it is not true, indeed,' said Theodora earnestly.

'What is not true?' asked Isabel. 'You are not very polite, I must say, Miss Astley. Do you mean to say I have said what is not true?'

'Yes, you know you have,' said Theodora.

'Did not you go to Upton the day we last walked out, then? If you will make me do so, I must say it out. I did not intend to betray you.'

'It is I who might betray you, Isabel Howard, if the truth were known,' said Theodora.

'Do not recriminate, Miss Astley,' said Mrs. Toogood. 'Be so good as to answer the question. Did you, or did you not, go into Upton on that day? Only yes or no, if you please,' as she saw Theodora was about to defend herself.

'Yes,' said Theodora.

'Then, as I remarked before, I am surprised and disappointed at your conduct, Miss Astley. You have been the instrument of introducing into the house a most dangerous malady. You were sent out in charge of the young ladies, and you betrayed your trust. Henceforth I shall be unable to place confidence in you.'

'Will you hear me, Mrs. Toogood?' said Theodora. 'Isabel Howard has misstated the facts altogether. She

knows that it was she herself who insisted upon going into Upton.'

'You have but this moment admitted that you yourself went into the town. Miss Astley, I am astonished at your prevarication.'

Theodora flushed with anger.

'I shall say no more. Think what you please, ma'am.'

'Do not add disrespect to your other errors, Miss Astley,' said the lady severely. 'It will be best, perhaps, to say no more.'

Mrs. Toogood left the schoolroom, and Theodora turned upon Isabel Howard.

'You are very cruel, and very wicked,' she said. 'You know perfectly well that I was not to blame. And, if you had any sense of honour, you would have told the truth.'

'Well, and I haven't said anything untrue. I did not tell a single cram; did I, girls?' asked Isabel, appealing to the rest.

'No; I think you got out of it very cleverly indeed,' remarked Mary Anne Carter.

'You did not tell the truth, at any rate; and it seems to me much the same thing as telling a lie,' said Theodora.

'Lie, Miss Astley, is a very vulgar word,' said Isabel sententiously, 'and not at all to be used by one young lady in speaking to another.'

'If a so-called young lady will stoop to tell one, I think she had best recognise it by its proper name,' said Theodora indignantly. 'I think, Isabel Howard, that

you are so used to telling what you call *crams*, that you sometimes forget what a wickedness you are guilty of.'

'Thank you, ma'am, for your moral lecture,' said Isabel, making a curtsey.

'But,' said Florence Leigh, speaking for the first time, after having listened to all that had passed, 'what is the truth? Did not Miss Astley go into the town? She said she did to Mrs. Toogood.'

'And she did, or she would not have said it,' answered Theodora, almost turning her back upon Florence, for she would have no discussion with her upon the subject. 'Let the matter rest. Isabel Howard has done all the mischief she could. I wish to say no more about it.'

'What a temper she is in!' exclaimed Sarah Hawkhurst, as soon as Theodora had left the room. 'And doesn't she hit you hard sometimes, Howard? She doesn't mind much what she says to you.' And Sarah Hawkhurst did not seem ill-pleased that her friend should occasionally have a hard hit.

'I do not see that,' said Isabel languidly, seating herself on a locker, and leaning her head upon her hand.

Throughout the discussion she had shown much less energy than usual; and now it was over, she again turned pale, as she had so frequently done lately.

'What's the matter?' asked Lucy Watson. 'Do not you feel well, Howard?'

'I have such a dreadful headache; and my throat feels sore,' answered Isabel.

'Good gracious! I hope you are not going to have the

fever! That is just how little Lloyd began. And your eyes look so heavy and bad; I declare I believe you are in for it, Howard!' said Sarah Hawkhurst. 'I won't go near you, I am sure. I shall be getting it also. I really think somebody ought to tell Mrs. Toogood.'

Isabel started to her feet with a cry.

'Don't say I am going to have it! Hawkhurst, you know nothing about it. How can you? It is only a headache and sore throat, I say. I shall be all right to-morrow,' and Isabel sank back upon her seat, and burst into tears.

Florence remembered the time when she had had scarlatina, and she felt convinced that Isabel was sicken-ing for it. She went in search of Theodora. After a time she found her cooling her indignation in the garden.

'Miss Astley,' said she, 'I think you had better, per-haps, let Mrs. Toogood know that Isabel Howard is very far from well. I believe she is sicken-ing for the fever.'

'Very well,' answered Theodora shortly, and she at once sought the drawing-room, and knocked at the door.

Mrs. Toogood listened with serious attention to her statement, and then, with a deep sigh, she said—

'You see, Miss Astley, the unhappy consequences of your disregard of duty. None can know where they may end. How true it is, that one false step may be the be-ginning of the most pernicious consequences!'

Theodora could but assent to these truisms. She had determined in her own mind that she would say no more. Her pride had been cruelly hurt by Mrs. Toogood's ready

disbelief in her, and unwillingness to listen to her defence of her conduct. She did not make allowance for the irritability caused by her nervousness and alarm at finding her pupils suddenly in the midst of so much danger—an irritability which was increased by Mrs. Toogood being an elderly woman. Young people are accustomed to think that old people are to be free from faults, because they are old, whereas old people make allowance for the faults of youth, because it is young. It is a pity that we should any of us forget that it is only in the world to come that we shall be faultless.

After a pause Mrs. Toogood resumed—

‘As I am alone with you, Miss Astley, I will take the opportunity of saying to you what I could not in kindness say before the young ladies. The young person who is in the responsible situation which you hold must be thoroughly trustworthy. I think you must make up your mind to resign your situation. I am sorry.’

Theodora bowed her head. She would not trust herself to speak; she feared trenching on the ground she had determined to avoid.

‘I will not be so unjust as to dismiss you,’ resumed Mrs. Toogood, ‘immediately, as you have in confidence given me the circumstances of your family. There will be no risk in your remaining here, as you have, I believe you stated, already had the scarlatina. Until you have met with another situation to suit you, I hope you will not think of leaving Prospect House.’

Theodora’s tears were fast dropping from her eyes; and

presently she placed her handkerchief to her eyes, and sobbed.

‘I am sorry it should have so happened,’ said Mrs Toogood. ‘I am disappointed and sorry. You had best retire now, Miss Astley, and try to compose yourself.’

Theodora turned abruptly, and ran headlong to her room. I am afraid Mrs. Toogood must have thought her manners needed improvement; for she quite forgot even to make the final curtsey with which she was accustomed to leave the room. As she left the drawing-room, she almost ran up against Lucy Watson, though Theodora was thinking of things of too great importance to herself to take much notice of any one, or even to conjecture what Lucy was doing there.





## CHAPTER XXX.

Confusion throughout the house—Mrs. Toogood finds it hard to get any one to nurse Isabel—The servants fly before the fever—General clearance of all but the sick and the nurses.

HEODORA sat down upon her bed to think. This was all Isabel Howard's doing. From the first hour of her coming to Prospect House, Isabel had set herself and the others against her. She had shown her ill-nature in a hundred ways, which Theodora could now recall to mind. She had sown dissension between her and the friend she loved better than any in the world ; and now she had thrust her from her situation, and thrown her on the world afresh, just as Mrs. Toogood had testified her approval of her by giving her a salary. It was very hard to bear ; and in the first few moments Theodora did not try to bear it at all ; but she kicked against the pricks, saying aloud again and again—

‘She is a wicked, spiteful girl ; she has done me all the harm she could ; and I have never injured her ! I hate her ! She is a wicked girl, and ought to be hated !’

Theodora was in a passion. Her heart was beating fast, and her thoughts whirling beyond her control. But after she had been sitting quietly for a little while longer, she came to her right mind, and what she had said struck her as very wicked. The echo of her own words seemed sounding in her ears, and 'I hate her' appeared a very unchristian sentence, as indeed it was. Theodora was ashamed of herself, and began to cry; and a moment afterwards she went on her knees and begged God's forgiveness for her wickedness, after which it was all right again, and she began to think of Isabel more kindly.

Lucy Watson, on leaving the drawing-room door, hastened to find Isabel. She found her lying on her bed groaning, with her head held between her hands.

'They think you are going to have the scarlet fever, Howard,' said Lucy, with her customary want of judgment; 'and I can tell you Mrs. Toogood is just in a way; and Astley has got her dismissal for having gone into the town that day.' Isabel gave no answer, but an impatient movement.

'You will be rid of her at any rate,' resumed Lucy; 'that's one comfort.'

'I am not going to have the fever,' exclaimed Isabel; 'it is nothing but one of my bad headaches; I have often had them as bad as this!' And she again began sobbing.

'Don't cry, Howard, or you'll make your head ever so much worse,' said Lucy. 'But I can tell you they have sent for the doctor.'

'I don't want the doctor; what have they done that

for? I won't have the fever,' said Isabel, as if she expected the doctor would bring the fever with him. Then suddenly changing the subject, she exclaimed, 'How do you know that Mrs. Toogood has dismissed Astley?'

'I heard her do it,' said Lucy, without the least appearance of shame. 'I listened at the door, and heard everything.'

'And didn't Astley tell?'

'She said nothing. I never saw such a creature in my life. She never said a word; and we were none of us there to contradict her, so that she might have said anything she chose. I am glad she is going, though; are not you?'

Isabel gave no answer. Perhaps the wickedness of her conduct might even then have appeared to her in something of its true character; for she was silent, until Lucy Watson's information returned to her memory, and she said—

'Go and tell Mrs. Toogood that it is all a mistake. I haven't got the fever, and I don't mean to have it. I won't have it! I tell you I won't have it! Tell her that I won't see the doctor; it is of no use.'

'Hush! hush! my dear young lady,' said a gentle voice at the door; and the gentleman of whom she was speaking entered the room.

Isabel fell back, feeling thoroughly ashamed of her vehemence. She quietly gave her hand to the doctor, that he might feel her pulse.

‘Have I got the fever?’ she asked anxiously. ‘Oh ! please say that I have not got it.’

‘And if you had it, my dear child,’ asked the doctor, ‘why should it alarm you so very much?’

‘Because I shall die. I know that I shall die,’ said Isabel.

‘There is no reason why you should die, my dear,’ he answered. ‘You are as safe in the hands of God, even under the fever, as at any time. And are you so very much afraid to die?’ he asked gently.

Isabel turned her face to the pillow, and sobbed passionately.

‘Poor child !’ said Dr. Home. ‘Well, don’t tell your troubles to me, if you do not care to do so ; but tell them to God, little girl. Tell Him all about your fears and your distress. It is only He can take away the fear of death.’

Isabel listened to him with a vague, anxious face. She hardly understood him. Then she said—

‘Have I got the scarlet fever?’

‘Yes,’ he answered ; ‘it is useless to pretend that you have not ; but of one thing I can assure you, that the more you keep yourself quiet and composed, the more likely you are to have it favourably. Now, who is going to keep this young lady company?’ asked the doctor, looking round at Mrs. Toogood.

‘I must make inquiries amongst the servants,’ Mrs. Toogood answered. ‘I am much vexed to have found Miss Watson in this room on our entrance ; but I sup-

pose she was not aware of the risk. You see, Doctor, our establishment will be very much reduced.'

'Where is Miss Terry?' asked Dr. Home.

'She is too much alarmed to remain in the house,' said Mrs. Toogood.

The doctor made a gesture of contempt. 'Well,' said he, 'I am afraid, my dear madam, you will have your hands full. But if you should require assistance, you must send to me.'

All this Isabel heard with her eyes closed and her head buried in the pillow. Then the doctor said he would come again in the evening, and took his leave. Mrs. Toogood went in search of Elizabeth. Elizabeth declared that she 'couldn't remain in the house with the fever, no, not if it was ever so,—which she was that frightful of infection, that she had been in the shakes and trembles ever since she had heard the fever was about. You might knock her down with a feather, you might!'

'I do not want to knock you down with a feather,' said Mrs. Toogood angrily. 'I want to know if you have not had the fever; if not, I will not keep you; but if you have, I should wish you to remain.'

'I might have it again,' said Elizabeth.

'Nothing of the kind.'

'I can't stay, ma'am; and that I just can't,' whimpered Elizabeth. 'It is the judgment of Providence, and I durseen't.'

'If you had any trust in Providence,' answered her mistress, 'you would have no fear in staying; however,

you would be useless if kept against your will. Where's cook ?'

'Cook have gone home, ma'am, if you please,' said Elizabeth. 'I wouldn't have left without a word, which I told cook ; and no dinner for the young ladies, nor nothing.'

'And who, then, is with Miss Lloyd ?' asked Mrs. Toogood, feeling and looking very angry.

'Miss Astley, ma'am ; she ain't afeard of nothing, not Miss Astley, though she have never had it, like.'

Mrs. Toogood hastily left Elizabeth, who lost no time in packing up her things and making off, and sought the room where Bertha Lloyd was lying. She could not arrive there, however, without interruption—this time in the shape of the girl who acted as under housemaid, who, with red swollen eyes, stood in her mistress's path. 'Well ! I suppose you wish to go home also,' said Mrs. Toogood.

'Yes ; if you please, ma'am.'

'Well, go as soon as ever you like,' said Mrs. Toogood, passing on. 'I suppose Charles will give warning next,' thought she. Charles, who was the page boy, had, however, not waited to give warning, but had followed the steps of the cook ; so that the house was deserted by the servants.

Mrs. Toogood, as she had expected, found Theodora in Bertha's room.

'Miss Astley,' she commenced, 'I thought you had informed me that you have had the scarlatina ?'

'I saw that you imagined I had, ma'am,' answered Theodora, 'and I did not contradict you; for, as I had already been with Bertha, I thought I had run the risk of infection, and it would have been adding to your difficulties had I gone home, especially as I heard Elizabeth declare she would not go near Bertha; indeed the poor child was quite alone for a time.'

'It was very considerate of you, Miss Astley; but suppose you become ill yourself.'

'As I said, I have already run the risk, Mrs. Toogood. Besides, if you allow me to stay with you, I shall be much obliged, as I should be very grieved to take the fever home amongst my little brothers and sisters.'

'And you are not afraid?'

Theodora smiled. 'I fear I shall not have much time for being afraid,' said she, 'for poor Lucy Watson is ill now.'

Mrs. Toogood hurried away to see the new patient, and from her to Isabel Howard; then repairing to the schoolroom, she addressed the girls, holding, while she did so, a handkerchief steeped in disinfecting fluid.

'My dear young ladies,' she said, 'those of you who are going home must exert themselves for themselves. I cannot, without risk, help in any of the preparations. The carriages to take you and your boxes away will be here at three o'clock. Be ready with your boxes at that time. You will require some refreshment before you go, and I am sorry to have to inform you that the servants, one and all, have left me in terror of the fever; so that I must request

you for to-day to wait upon yourselves. You will, doubtless, find abundance of cold meat in the larder. I must trust to your sagacity to find out whereabouts the larder is.'

As if the girls did not know !

' I will now wish you all farewell. I regret to add that Miss Watson, who was to have left this establishment to-day, has shown symptoms of fever. I trust that her case will be the last. Good-bye to each one of you, and may God protect you ! '

The poor old lady's voice broke here, and she bowed silently in answer to the numerous 'Good-bye ma'am's' which came from the girls ; then she returned to Isabel's room upstairs.

Before the day was out, the household was reduced to Mrs. Toogood, Theodora, Florence Leigh, Letitia Jones, and the three sick girls. When Dr. Home came in the evening, he was requested to procure a woman who would come daily to do the cooking and the down-stairs work. Letitia was kept strictly to the basement floor, so that she might have no communication with the fever patients or attendants, and a bed was put up for her in a room down-stairs. Letitia found life very dull under these circumstances. She had not a soul to whom to say a word excepting the charwoman, whose entire conversation was of the scarlatina, and of the number of people it had attacked—a subject which was not calculated to raise the spirits of Letitia.



## CHAPTER XXXI.

Melancholy letters from home—Officiousness of Letitia Jones—The tidings in the newspaper—Poor Alfred's fate—Mrs. Toogood in a difficulty—There is always some one in the world for whom to live and exert ourselves.

**N**OW you know there is a saying, 'Misfortunes never come alone.' Theodora thought it a bitterly true saying that day. In the morning she had had a letter from her mother filled with lamentations over the necessity of Theodora's remaining at Prospect House, although she saw how much wiser and kinder it was in Mrs. Toogood, and in Theo herself, that she should not return home amongst the little ones. Theodora had told her mother nothing of the origin of the fever, and the result to herself; she thought that such a piece of ill news would be learnt early enough when the passing anxiety was at an end. Mrs. Astley had not the strength of mind to keep her worries to herself. Perhaps she was still influenced by the old idea that Theodora's feelings were not very acute, or perhaps it was only that Theodora was destined to be the bearer, as there is such

an one in most families, of all the family annoyances as well as of her own. There is usually a general confidant, and I think that such may consider themselves as the most highly favoured of their sex. Mrs. Astley's letter spoke despondingly of Gertrude. The intimacy with the Clarkes was greater than ever; and Gertrude's defiance of her mother's wishes more open. Theodora was thinking over all these things, sitting in the room with little Bertha Lloyd, who was restlessly throwing herself about, incessantly requiring some attention, which never gave satisfaction, when she heard some pebbles come flying against the window. The bedroom was situated at the back of the house, and overlooked the garden. Theodora went to the window, and saw Letitia Jones looking up towards it, holding one of her hands closed over some gravel from the path, which she was making ready to throw, in case the first attack had not received attention. It was late in the day, and Theodora did not dare open the window without leave, because of Bertha; therefore, to Letitia's signs to throw up the sash, she shook her head, and pointed behind her to the bed. Letitia then, with further signs, made Theodora understand that she was to go into the adjoining bedroom, on a line with the one where she was. Theodora complied and opened the window. Letitia held in her hand a newspaper.

'I say,' commenced she, as soon as the window was open, 'have not you a brother, or something, in the navy, or going into the navy?'

'Yes; why?' asked Theodora.

‘What is his name?’ asked Letitia again. ‘For this may not be the same after all, you know.’

‘Alfred is his name. What do you mean, Letitia?’ Theodora felt frightened, she did not know why. Letitia looked rather foolish when she saw that she had alarmed Theodora, and she hardly knew what to answer.

‘Is there anything in that paper?’ asked Theodora.

‘Yes; only you must not put yourself in such a way about it, Astley. It may not be true perhaps; but it is here.’

‘What is true? Do speak out, Letitia; what is in the paper?’

‘Only they say he is drowned,’ said Letitia stupidly. She felt more frightened still at what she had done when she saw Theodora’s face; it was so pale and agitated.

‘Give me the paper,’ said she. ‘I don’t believe it; it can’t be true.’

‘Well, you may believe it or not as you choose,’ answered Letitia, rather offended. ‘All I can say is, here it is in black and white.’

‘Give me the paper,’ was all that Theodora said.

‘How can I give the paper? I cannot reach up to the window,’ said Letitia.

‘I must see it! oh, I must see it!’ cried Theodora, wringing her hands together.

‘Well, I’m sure I wish I had never told you,’ observed Letitia—an idea which might have occurred to her long before.

Theodora ran into the adjoining room, where she knew

there were several pieces of twine. With trembling fingers she tied them together.

‘Now, fasten the newspaper to the end,’ said Theodora.

But Letitia could not reach the dangling end of string, although Theodora leant from the window as far as ever she could stretch. She drew it up again, and tied her pocket handkerchief to the end. Still it would not do until a second handkerchief had been fastened on.

‘And now, how am I to tie the paper on? I am sure I don’t know,’ said awkward Letitia.

‘Tear a hole in the corner, and put the string through; make haste! make haste!’ exclaimed Theodora, whose excitement had arrived at such a climax that she was ready to throw herself from the window in order to reach the newspaper. Letitia did so after a time, which seemed to her companion interminable, and then Theodora pulled in the twine. But the paper fluttered and blew about in the air, and sometimes would get filled with the wind like a small sail of a ship, and Theodora thought several times that she should never get it safely into the room. At any other time she would have laughed at her own vain efforts in wrestling with the newspaper; but now she only struggled to obtain it.

Then, when she had safely landed it, torn in many places, and spread it on the floor, she was some time before she could find the paragraph to which Letitia had alluded. She ran her eyes down every column in vain, until a vague hope seized her that perhaps Letitia

Jones had played a heartless hoax upon her. She had known such things happen amongst the girls.

But it was no hoax. After a time she saw the paragraph—‘Loss of three naval cadets while bathing at Southsea.’ She glanced down the paragraph, and caught sight of her brother’s name with two others, and then her eyes could not see for a minute, and she laid her head down upon the newspaper, spread upon the floor as it was. Then she roused herself, and carefully read the paragraph through. The boys had been bathing alone. Having been invited for an afternoon to a lady’s house in Southsea, they had during their walk imprudently gone out into the water beyond the Castle, at a time when no other bathers were there. With the customary thoughtlessness of boys they had swam a race together—so it was supposed; for the lady at whose house they were spending the afternoon testified that they had in her presence boasted of their skill in racing in the water. It was further supposed that one of the swimmers had been seized with cramp; for a passer-by had heard a cry from the water, and had seen two boys swim out in the direction of the cry. This passer-by had stood to watch, and after a time had seen a third head rise to the surface, and then a struggle in the water, and two of the boys go down together, as if the first had caught the other and had pulled him down with him. Then this looker-on had run along Southsea beach, crying for help, until he had succeeded in procuring a boat, and had hastened back to the spot. But

by the time the boat reached the place where the boys had been last seen, there was no trace of any one of them ; for the boat station at Southsea is almost a quarter of a mile from the Castle. The place was dragged, and towards evening two inanimate bodies were found ; but the third body, that of Alfred Astley, had not been discovered at the time the information had gone to press. All this Theodora read with a cold, stiff feeling all over her ; and then she laid her head down upon the newspaper again, and remained so until Mrs. Toogood entered the room and found her. Of course Mrs. Toogood supposed that Theodora was taken ill, and fast sickening for the scarlatina ; and you will not wonder that the poor lady's heart sank as she looked at her. 'Miss Astley,' said she, 'I see you are ill. You must lie down upon the bed. Let me help you to rise.'

Theodora lifted her face, from which every tinge of colour had gone, and looked vacantly at Mrs. Toogood. She tried to speak, but said nothing, and her finger pointed at the newspaper paragraph. Then, for the first time, Mrs. Toogood saw the paper ; and her strict prohibition against the introduction of such literature into her school was the next thought which occurred to her.

'Miss Astley,' said she, 'you must be aware that it is against my orders that the young ladies under my charge should come in contact with the public journals. I regret to see that you have transgressed the rule.'

Theodora attempted no explanation ; but she still

pointed with her trembling finger to the paragraph. Mrs. Toogood took it with dignity, and read it. Then, as she gathered the truth, she forgot all about her prohibition and her dignity, and she was the kind old woman that she could be at times, and that she was intended by God to be.

'My poor girl,' said she gently, 'this must be a dreadful blow. So sudden too; how awfully sudden! and so unprepared!'

'He was not unprepared, ma'am,' said Theodora, rousing herself to speech to defend her beloved brother, and speaking in the selfishness of grief as if Alfred were the only one lost. 'He was the best, the dearest of boys. He was a very good boy; a very religious boy.'

'I am glad to hear it,' said Mrs. Toogood rather stiffly, for she half doubted that Theodora's partiality might exalt her brother into something very different to what he was. 'I am glad to hear it; but boys are very thoughtless.'

'Alfred was not,' said Theodora; then suddenly putting her hands before her face, she cried out, 'Oh, poor mamma! oh, poor mamma! it will nearly break her heart.'

Mrs. Toogood found herself in an awkward position. Had she followed the bent of her inclination at this moment, and caressed and comforted the sorrowing girl, she would have outraged all her foregone decorum of behaviour as the head of Prospect House; and she had so long worn this outward appearance of coldness

and propriety, especially towards those in a subordinate situation, as was that of Theodora Astley, that she could not now all at once unbend from her formality. So she let the girl cry for a little, and then she said—

‘Perhaps you had best write to Mrs. Astley at once on the subject. It will be a comfort to her in her distress, and a dutiful relief to you.’

Mrs. Toogood was in the right. Nothing could be better for Theodora under the circumstances than such an occupation. It gave her an opportunity of indulging in every loving expression over the lost Alfred, and crying until she was exhausted.

Mrs. Toogood left her to herself that day; but at bed-time she kindly had the requisite things taken into the room adjoining that of Bertha, and sat down with Theodora, in order that she should not, as so often happened in this time of fever, have a solitary meal.

It seemed like days and weeks to Theodora since she had read the paragraph, and already the event was fading into the distance; and her heart smote her upon little Bertha Lloyd observing—

‘You have been so unkind all to-day, Miss Astley. You have hardly spoken to me at all; and I have been *so* miserable! ’

‘How selfish I am!’ said Theodora. ‘Bertha, dear, I have been very miserable myself too. My own dear brother is drowned.’

‘Is he?’ said Bertha. ‘Oh! do tell me all about it; I should so like to hear. Was that what made you lie

upon the floor for such a time? I could not make you speak, though I spoke to you several times.'

Theodora sat down by Bertha's bedside; and it was a comfort to speak to the warm-hearted child about the loss of her brother.





## CHAPTER XXXII.

Letitia meddles with the post-box—Isabel gets worse—Mrs. Toogood breaks down—Theodora volunteers to nurse Isabel—Mrs. Toogood appeals to the doctor.

**T**HEODORA had but little time to indulge her grief for Alfred's loss. Her life was too much one of activity. It is the indolent and empty-minded who nurse their sorrows. But when the opportunity came, Theodora would give way to sudden and violent bursts of tears, as if making up in force for the rareness of the indulgence. Thus, when she received the answer to her letter to her mother, all the first freshness of her sorrow revived; and she was ready to be angry with what she thought her heartless and quick forgetfulness of Alfred. It was not that she had forgotten him, but that, trying to fulfil the duties which were at the time put upon her, she exhausted herself in sympathy with others instead of in self-pity.

Theodora was a little surprised that after this letter she did not hear from her mother for some time. She expected that Mrs. Astley would have written to her more

frequently than usual. Theodora herself was scarcely able to get even a half-hour for writing a letter ; she had so much to do in attending upon the sick girls who were placed in her charge—that is, Lucy Watson occasionally, and at all times Bertha Lloyd. There was no nurse to be procured in Upton. All their hands were full of employment ; and Mrs. Toogood was exerting herself night and day, until she began to show signs of breaking down, although she would never acknowledge fatigue. Florence Leigh took charge of the house. It was found that the charwoman could cook nothing in a way fit to eat, and Florence suddenly developed an astonishing talent for cooking.

One great difficulty was Letitia Jones. Mrs. Toogood was most anxious to keep her from infection, and, therefore, she was never allowed to come in contact with any member of the household. But Letitia was so foolish that she was incessantly grumbling at the restrictions laid upon her, and striving, whenever she could, to break through the rules. One of these rules was, that the letters brought by the postmen, and dropped into the box at the gate, should be left there for a day before being taken out. Letitia wandered listlessly about the garden almost the whole day. She might have found numbers of books to read, for she had leave to take any she chose from Mrs. Toogood's shelves in the drawing-room ; but she did not care for reading.

One day she thus wandered about, seeking for interest in something, and while she did so, the postman dropped

a letter in the box. Letitia, from mere idle curiosity, opened the box and took out the letter to look at it. She turned it over and over, and tried to look inside it—it was addressed to Theodora Astley—when Mrs. Toogood's figure appeared at one of the upper windows. Letitia was not near enough to the letter-box to put the letter back again, so she hastily put it in her pocket, thinking she would replace it at some future time; but the same afternoon Mrs. Toogood sent her word by the charwoman to keep at the back of the house, and the letter remained in her pocket until she had forgotten it; and a fortnight afterwards, coming upon it unexpectedly, Letitia threw the letter into the fire, thinking if she gave it to Theodora now, that there might be some question about the delay.

Isabel Howard became rapidly worse. Her case was a much more serious one than that of either of the others, and from the first Mrs. Toogood had attended to her; but one day, just as Dr. Home was leaving the house, Mrs. Toogood fainted. Both she and the doctor had been talking upon the upper landing. Dr. Home called to Theodora, who immediately went to him from the room where Lucy Watson and Bertha were.

‘It is nothing, nothing whatever,’ murmured Mrs. Toogood, beginning to recover consciousness almost immediately; ‘it is simply folly.’

‘It is simply that you are thoroughly exhausted, my dear lady,’ answered the doctor. ‘You must and shall rest yourself. I will make another effort to procure Mrs.

Ames ; and if I cannot get her, I will send to London for a nurse. I wish I had done so a week ago.'

Dr. Home helped Mrs. Toogood into the bedroom, and then said, 'Until some assistance comes to you, you must positively rest yourself.'

'How can I,' she asked, 'without a servant in the house? This child,' pointing to Theodora, 'is as much worn out as myself. Miss Leigh has had to work like a domestic. We have all of us our hands full. How can I refuse to do my share?'

'Indeed, dear Mrs. Toogood, I am not in the least knocked up,' said Theodora.

Mrs. Toogood turned to Dr. Home. 'If you will send for a nurse, I shall be really obliged to you ; but until she comes, I must attend to Miss Howard. Hers is not a case for ordinary care, you have said yourself, Dr. Home.'

'True,' said he.

'And even if she would, I could not allow Miss Astley to help there.'

'I am not afraid, ma'am,' said Theodora, simply. 'I am sure, if you will allow me to nurse Miss Howard, and will take my place in this room, where Lucy and Bertha are not so ill, that the change alone would be a rest for you, and God will take care of me.'

Mrs. Toogood laid her hand upon Theodora's shoulder. 'Yes, He will ; He will take care of you ; but it is a great risk, and I could not ask you to take it in such a case as this, my dear.'

Theodora looked at her so inquiringly, that Mrs. Toogood, in explanation, added—

‘I have not been quite blind or deaf, Miss Astley, as I told you once before; but I have been, I believe, very unjust, and I see it now. However, it is not, I trust, too late to alter; and this is not the time for explanations.’

Theodora coloured crimson, as if she had been accused of some misdemeanour, instead of being praised. ‘Let me nurse Isabel Howard,’ said she.

‘What! would you run such a risk, girl, for her who has tried in every way to injure you?’ asked Mrs. Toogood.

‘She is ill now,’ said Theodora. ‘Perhaps she may die;’ for she did not know how to answer.

‘What do you say?’ asked Mrs. Toogood, turning to Dr. Home. ‘Should I be justified in letting her do so?’

‘Go away, my dear, for the present,’ said she to Theodora; and Theo disappeared into the bedroom. To her own astonishment, as much as that of the doctor, Mrs. Toogood burst into tears.

‘That girl,’ said she, when she could speak, ‘that girl has been set upon by the rest, headed by Isabel Howard. I have suspected many things which have now been confirmed by Miss Howard’s half-conscious revelations. Theodora Astley’s life in this house has been, I believe, a martyrdom, and yet she now volunteers to nurse the very girl who has been her enemy. I would not have asked her to do it. Can you account for it, Doctor?’

‘Easily, my dear madam,’ said Dr. Home; ‘the girl you

speak of is a practical, and not only a professing Christian. She has been taught by God himself.'

'But ought I to allow her to do so?'

'She has hitherto escaped the fever; and my own impression is that she has either had it, or is not susceptible of it. I don't think she will run greater danger of scarlatina in nursing Miss Howard than in continuing with the others. Let her follow her own brave, loyal heart, Mrs. Toogood. I fully believe that God will take care of his own. I have often observed that those fearless spirits escape the evils which come upon the timid.'

So Theodora was told that she might go and nurse Isabel, and she vacated her easier post to Mrs. Toogood.

During all this time Florence Leigh had had but little intercourse with Theodora. Her unaccustomed duties in the household engrossed her time completely, and she took very little part in the nursing, excepting by occasionally taking the place of Mrs. Toogood by Isabel's bedside, when Mrs. Toogood, who had also laid up in her memory for a future occasion the fact of the estrangement between Florence and Theodora, would go and keep the latter company.

From thenceforth Theodora had enough to occupy her thoughts to prevent her from dwelling upon any private interests, and to put a stop even to wondering why her mother had not written, for Isabel Howard was delirious.



## CHAPTER XXXIII.

Isabel's delirium—Florence tells Mrs. Toogood of Isabel's delirious revelations—Florence takes a cup of tea to Theodora—The quarrel is made up—Isabel is in great danger.

**H**E was delirious when Theodora went to her. She stared at her, and did not recognise her, and then renewed her rambling talk, addressing different people in turn.

If you have ever nursed a delirious person, you will know that there is nothing more harassing than to listen to their excited speeches, and to watch their movements. Theodora was half frightened at first, for Isabel's eyes were so wild, and her voice was unnaturally high pitched. At times her talking would die off into confused murmurs, as if she were exhausted, and was going to sleep ; and a moment afterwards she would start up in the bed, in a sitting position, and harangue some invisible person.

Towards evening she was quieter, and Theodora thought that she would compose herself for the night. Poor Mrs. Toogood had exerted herself to the very last moment of her strength, and now she gave way. Fortunately Lucy

Watson was getting better, and did not require so much attention ; and in the evening Florence Leigh was free to help Mrs. Toogood.

That lady had almost given in, and looked more dead than alive. When Florence gained the bedroom she noticed her pallor, and exclaimed—

‘I am sure you are thoroughly worn out, ma’am. Do lie down on the sofa. I will attend to Lucy and Bertha.’

‘I am afraid I am, my dear. You see I am not young now, and all this anxiety tells upon me ; but it will be over in a couple of days now, Miss Leigh. I have requested Dr. Home to send for a nurse from London. I wish I had done so a week ago ; but I could not foresee that Miss Howard would be so ill as she is. I have obliged you to do strange things, for a young lady, Miss Leigh. I do not know hardly what your papa, Sir Henry, would say to it.’

‘My father would be only too glad that I should be able to make myself useful, ma’am, I am sure,’ answered Florence ; ‘and I am sure also that I should be ashamed to be idle when everybody is so occupied.’

‘I don’t know what I should have done had it not been for Miss Astley,’ returned Mrs. Toogood, who had consented to lie down, while Florence was making her some tea. ‘She is a most self-devoted and noble girl.’

Florence gave no answer ; she was busy with the teapot.

‘Come here, my dear,’ said Mrs. Toogood. Florence obeyed, and her schoolmistress held her by the hand as she spoke.

‘Florence, you and Miss Astley used to be close friends ; what is it has come between you ?’

Still Florence gave no answer, and Mrs. Toogood continued—

‘I believe we, many of us, owe Miss Astley amends, if amends in the future can ever do away with past unkindness. I myself, amongst the rest, have not treated her with justice. During the time I have sat with Isabel Howard, when occasionally she has been light-headed, she has revealed her set plan to turn out of this establishment Miss Astley. I have grieved over the wickedness which Isabel Howard has revealed of herself ; and I have grieved that I also should have been misled, by her representations, to do injustice to Miss Astley.’

‘What has she said, ma’am?’ asked Florence eagerly.

‘These are painful things to talk of, my dear,’ answered Mrs. Toogood ; ‘but, under these circumstances, it is necessary. Miss Howard spoke of having indirectly discovered a secret you had confided to Miss Astley—a family matter—and of having made use of it against her.’

‘But she discovered it from Theodora,’ exclaimed Florence.

‘No such thing. It seems she listened whilst you were in the summer-house, and heard it herself. You can have no idea, Miss Leigh, how painful it is to me to find that young ladies under my care should have been guilty of such duplicity, and have shown such want of honour.’

‘Of course, ma’am ; of course it must be,’ murmured

Florence dreamily. 'I cannot understand it. Isabel Howard met us that day on our return to the house, having been lying down with a headache. What a hypocrite she must be!' The tears had been gathering in Florence's eyes, and she said, 'Poor Theodora! And what a weak fool I have been to be so taken in!' exclaimed Florence, after a pause. 'I have behaved wickedly. I came here meaning to be a good girl, and I have done nothing but wrong. If I had not been blind, I might have seen through Isabel Howard. I am very sorry, Mrs. Toogood.'

'Tell Miss Astley so,' replied Mrs. Toogood. 'You owe it to her, my dear.'

'It would be no use now, ma'am,' said Florence; 'she never notices me or speaks to me. She hates me, I believe; and she is right to do so.'

'Take a cup of tea to her, my dear,' said Mrs. Toogood. 'I daresay she will be glad of it.'

Florence poured out the tea as directed, and slowly made her way to Isabel's room. She felt too shy to open the door, for she did not know what to say to Theodora. The long misunderstanding had brought a strangeness between them which appeared unconquerable.

Theodora looked up as the door opened and admitted Florence; and the latter immediately observed—

'Mrs. Toogood sent me, thinking you would like a cup of tea.'

'How is Mrs. Toogood? Thank you,' said Theodora, as she took it.

‘She is, I am afraid, very unwell. I hope she is not going to be ill.’

‘Ill!’ exclaimed Isabel Howard; ‘who is ill? I am not ill. I have not the fever, so it is of no use your saying that I have. You none of you know anything about it. I won’t be ill; I tell you I won’t have the scarlet fever!’ she screamed. ‘If I did, I should die; and I cannot die; I dare not die; I am not fit to die!’

Theodora tried to calm her, by stroking her hair and her hands.

‘Why do you look at me in that way with your great big eyes?’ she asked. ‘Who are you? Are you another saint? I got rid of the first, for I hated her. It was rather cleverly done, do you know? If you won’t tell Mrs. Toogood, I’ll tell you all about it; but there, I know you’ll be telling somebody. Girls always blab. I always do myself. I couldn’t die after all the crams I have told. She said they were lies, if you call them by their right name; but then lie is a very vulgar word, and I am sure Mrs. Toogood would be awfully shocked.’

Theodora was looking only at Isabel, but Florence was looking at her. She longed to speak, but she could not find a word to say, although she made an effort; and this is what she said at last—

‘Will you not drink your tea?’

Theodora sat down again, and complied.

‘Does she always go on like this?’ asked Florence.

‘Not always, but when anything excites her. She sometimes lies still and mutters.’

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Florence beseeches Theodora's forgiveness.—*Page 267.*

'I don't think you ought to be alone with her. Shall I stay with you?'

'No, thank you,' answered Theodora quietly; 'I am not afraid.' Then she added, 'Mrs. Toogood will want you with her.'

Then Florence suddenly threw herself on her knees, and put her head upon Theodora's lap and sobbed, and said—

'Oh! Theo, I am so sorry! Can you ever forgive me? Am I too bad for you to forgive? Theo, can you ever love me again? May we ever be friends again?'

Theodora bent over her, and kissed her hair; and crying as much as Florence, she answered—

'I have nothing to forgive; it is all over now. I have always loved you, Florence, always through it all, dear. Oh! I am so thankful that it is all right. I am so thankful and so happy!'

I am afraid poor Mrs. Toogood was forgotten for the time; but she guessed what was taking place, and was satisfied.

'You are very good, Theo,' said Florence, after a long pause, during which the girls had sat with their arms round each other's waists, in the manner of girls.

'What do you mean?' asked Theodora.

'I could not have worn myself out to nurse a girl who had treated me as she has treated you,' said Florence, indicating Isabel.

'Yes, you could, dear,' Theodora answered simply. 'What else was there for me to do? I could not let

her be left alone. And, you remember, the Bible tells us that we are to be kind to those who are unkind to us.'

Florence commenced crying afresh, a movement which astonished Theodora; but she thought she cried from excitement, and only kissed her, which, of course, made her cry the more.

'Do not tell Mrs. Toogood how unquiet she is,' observed Theodora, with her usual thoughtfulness for others, as Isabel started up afresh at some word she had caught in the last sentence spoken.

'But I think I ought to remain with you, Theo,' said Florence.

'How can Mrs. Toogood, in her present state, attend upon those other two? Bertha is so exacting and so fractious, I know. If Isabel should become worse, I can call you.'

She ceased as Dr. Home entered. He nodded and smiled at her, on seeing her seated by the bedside, and then went to his patient.

Isabel was worse than Theodora had imagined, and she had the doctor's company throughout the night, until, towards morning, Isabel fell into an exhausted sleep.



## CHAPTER XXXIV.

The nurse arrives—Party in Mrs. Astley's sitting-room—Gertrude's system of bribing Georgey—The annual fair—Miss Clarke's first-rate scheme—Gertrude's indifference to her mother's comfort.

**T**HEODORA was so happy in her reconciliation to Florence, that everything appeared light to her; yet she had time to grieve over Alfred now, for Isabel was resigned into the hands of the nurse, who had just arrived from London. This nurse was a large, bony woman, very decided in her manner with her patient, and by no means pretty to look at. Florence and Theodora had taken the opportunity of her arrival to have a good long talk together, in the fashion of former days, and a good cry over Alfred.

And while this was going on at Prospect House, there was a small party collected in the sitting-room of Mrs. Astley's cottage, composed of the lady of the house, Mr. Morgan, and some others; and this was what they were saying—

‘I cannot help feeling very anxious and uncomfortable about Theo,’ commenced Mrs. Astley. ‘It is now a

week since I have heard from her ; and it is so strange that she should not have answered my last letter.'

' I have no doubt she has her hands full enough, poor child,' answered Mr. Morgan.

' Were it not that Mrs. Toogood herself wrote to me, and promised to let me know instantly should Theodora be ill, I should be really alarmed.'

' Don't be that, dear Mrs. Astley,' said Mr. Morgan, laughing. ' We have had enough of causeless alarm lately. Don't let us meet troubles half way.'

' Yes, indeed,' said Mrs. Astley, her eyes filling with tears, as she looked round upon her children assembled. ' Still, I thought she would have answered my *last* letter immediately.'

' Perhaps she did answer it, and nobody put it in the post, mamma,' suggested Edith. ' You know Theo said they had no servants, and that Florence Leigh had to cook the dinner. What fun ! No servants ! I wish I was there to help.'

' You goose !' said her mother.

' And to have to wash the dishes and clean the fire-place one's self, just like a charwoman ; oh ! I should like it so much, mamma ; wouldn't you ?' said Edith.

' No, I should not, Edie.'

' I am sure I would not do it,' observed Gertrude. ' I would go without dinner before I would cook it.'

' Well, I should not care to cook it all alone for myself,' said Edith innocently ; ' but I should like to cook it for mamma, and dear Theo, and the rest of you.'

‘I wouldn’t, then,’ said Gertrude.

‘Oh Gertie! Gertie!’ exclaimed Mr. Morgan, ‘your selfishness is something beyond belief. Do you think, child, that you were sent into the world to live only for yourself? Sooner or later, Gertrude, you will be made to repent of all this folly and wickedness.’

‘Who is to make me repent?’ asked Gertrude insolently, looking at Mr. Morgan from under her half-closed eyes, and then glancing at the reflection of herself in the mirror over the mantelpiece.

‘God will make you repent, unless—which I pray may not be the case—He has left you alone to your own pride and wickedness. Yes,’ continued Mr. Morgan, noticing her glance into the looking-glass; ‘yes, we can all see as well as you that you are very pretty, Gertrude; but remember that for that gift of beauty also you will have to give account in the day of judgment. You might, by your pretty face, influence others for good, and hitherto you have persuaded them only to harm.’

‘Thank you,’ said Gertrude; ‘but I don’t want your lectures.’

She could see that her mother was crying, but Gertrude took no notice. She went and sat down by the window, while another of Mrs. Astley’s children went to his mother and wiped away her tears. Oh, why could not Gertrude remember that all those tears were seen by God, and that his angels registered who caused them; and that, as a blessing is promised to those chil-

dren who honour their parents, surely God's anger must overtake them who set at naught his command?

Gertrude sought her friends the Miss Clarkes, and repeated to them, with improving touches, what Mr. Morgan had said to her—a repetition which elicited from those vulgar girls shouts of laughter, and impelled them to style Mr. Morgan 'an old frump,' which so very much amused Gertrude, who had been indebted to Mr. Morgan, from the moment of her birth, for more kindnesses than she in her ingratitude cared to remember, that thenceforth, in compliment to the great wit of the Miss Clarkes, she called him by that name.

I have several times mentioned little Georgey. He was now five years old, and certainly no longer a baby. Gertrude took more notice of this child than she did of the rest of her brothers and sisters; for Georgey's baby sense of honour was not proof against the bribes of lollipops, and Gertrude found the child useful in carrying notes and messages between herself and the Clarkes. He was a difficult ally to manage, though; for, being clever enough to find that lollipops were given him to hold his tongue, he would be constantly threatening to disclose something to which he had been made a party, and Gertrude's small amount of pocket-money went in a great degree in keeping her little brother quiet.

As the summer returned, all sorts of travelling shows and amusements came to the neighbouring town, as they do in all places. The time for the annual fair was arrived. During the week following the day I am

*Gertrude quarrels with the Clarkes.* 273

speaking of, the whole neighbourhood would be in a ferment.

Mrs. Astley, who was anxious in every way that she could to give Gertrude amusement, had promised to make an effort to go to this fair, especially as Gertrude's two brothers would be able to go with them. She did not say how unequal she felt to the exertion of going ; and Gertrude's selfishness prevented her from noticing that her mother was ill. Nothing was talked of for days but this fair. Georgey was wild about it, and Edie and Willie saved up all their few halfpence in anticipation of it. Only one condition Mrs. Astley made—that they should not be accompanied by the Clarkes.

'So you are not to go with us, I can tell you,' observed Gertrude to her friends; for Gertrude, I daresay you have perceived by this time, had no delicacy of feeling. 'Mamma says she will only go on condition that you do not come.'

'Well, I suppose we shall see you there at any rate,' said Miss Loo, winking her eye and jerking her head on one side. 'Of course we shan't speak to each other; oh no! when mar don't approve of it! We are much too good a child for that! We will do just as we are told for fear of a whipping!'

'I am not a child,' exclaimed Gertrude indignantly.

'Who said you was?' asked Miss Clarke.

'Wur, Carry, not was,' suggested Miss Louisa.

'Oh, Law! what's the difference, I'd like to know? Well, wur, then, since you will have it. Other people,

who shall be nameless, would keep you a child, though, still, my dear ; but as I always say, Gertrude, you're a girl of spirit, and are not going to be humbugged by any number of old frumps.'

'Of course not,' said Gertrude, who thought she was saying something fine and independent.

'I'll tell you how we will manage,' resumed Miss Clarke, and she fell to whispering to Gertrude, Miss Louisa's head being also bent close to the other two heads. Gertrude laughed nervously.

'Won't that be first-rate?' concluded Miss Clarke. 'No one will ever know ; and I call it a downright shame to deprive girls of their little fun ; that I do.'

The day of the fair arrived, and Mrs. Astley, determined to keep her promise, started with Gertrude, Willie, and the little ones. It was a very warm day, and a most fatiguing expedition, made more so by Gertrude's impatience to get to the fair, which induced her to hurry every one forward as if her life depended upon being there early. I am not blaming Gertrude for wishing to go to the fair, that was but natural ; but she was very much to be blamed for her indifference to her mother's comfort. At length the place was reached ; by which time Georgey was excessively cross at having been dragged along at a trotting pace for the last ten minutes. Of course the children wished to go into every one of the shows ; and it was weary work to Mrs. Astley, to whom fairs were no longer amusing, to pass from one suffocating booth to another to look at panoramas or moving wax-works. But she went through it all,

even Wombwell's Menagerie, with the usual patient resignation of a mother ; but Wombwell's Menagerie was just a little too much for her, and as she came down the steps from it, she fell forward and turned pale, so that little Willie screamed. A kind man who stood near caught Mrs. Astley, or she would have fallen, and exclaimed—

‘Here, some of you womankind, come and help. This lady is fainting, seems to me.’

Immediately two or three women assisted ; and one of the keepers of a gingerbread stall ran forward with a chair, and another, after a short delay, with a glass of water.

Mrs. Astley quickly recovered herself. She felt so annoyed at having turned faint in so public a place, that the annoyance helped to restore her. She rose, and thanked all the kind-hearted people who were so anxious to help her, and said that she was quite well, and able to go on.

At that moment Mr. Morgan drove through the fair. He was recognised at once by the various keepers of the stalls, who had served him in this fair year after year.

‘Put you up a pound of spice nuts, Doctor?’ asked one, quickly running behind her stall, and holding out some of the gingerbread in her hand.

‘You won’t forget Hannah this year, now, will you, Doctor?’ cried another. ‘It’s more nor ten years as I’ve served you, and no one can say a word against Hannah’s nuts—not in all the country, and that’s the truth.’

Mr. Morgan laughed, drew up, and began buying pounds of spice nuts from his various friends with great impar-

tiality. The wonder was, what he was to do with them all when he got them home ; but probably the village children knew best what became of them. As he was paying for them, he for the first time caught sight of Mrs. Astley.

‘Why, how came you here?’ he asked. ‘I am sure this is no place for you.’

Several of the women began in a pitying tone to explain to Mr. Morgan how unwell Mrs. Astley had been.

‘I was just going home,’ observed Mrs. Astley ; ‘it is quite time.’

‘Time for those little ones to be in bed,’ answered Mr. Morgan. ‘You cannot walk home, Mrs. Astley. I will drive you.’

Mrs. Astley looked towards Gertrude and the children.

‘Oh, we will see them on in front of us before we leave,’ answered he, understanding her look. ‘Of course they will go through the fields, the short way ; so they will be home as soon as ourselves.’

‘Sooner, I expect,’ said Willie.

‘Well, let us see which will be home soonest,’ said Mr. Morgan. ‘Come, start, there’s good children.’

To the surprise of everybody, Gertrude did as she was bid, without any demur ; and as soon as Mr. Morgan had seen the party safe into the first field, which led towards home, he whipped on his horse, and hastened along the road, when Mrs. Astley observed—

‘How well Gertrude behaved ! and I am so thankful that we did not meet the Clarkes there.’

‘I don’t know what you call well,’ answered Mr.

Morgan. ‘It was like her customary selfishness to drag you to such a place ; and probably the reason she came home so quietly is, because she has seen everything there is to be seen.’

They drove in silence for a time, and then Mr. Morgan spoke again.

‘You should never have gone at all, Mrs. Astley. You are not fit for it ; but I believe you would half kill yourself to please that ungrateful girl.’

‘Certainly I made an effort to go in order to please her and the little ones. I do not wish Gertrude to think that I stand in the way of her enjoyment when I can further it,’ said Mrs. Astley ; ‘and I am afraid that by keeping her too much at home, I may throw her upon the company of the Miss Clarkes. I wish those people had never come into the neighbourhood.’

‘So do I,’ said Mr. Morgan ; ‘but their coming has shown Gertrude’s true character. There is no virtue, Mrs. Astley, in living free from temptation, the virtue lies in resisting it.’

‘Ah ! Gertrude is not like Theodora.’

‘So I could have told you years ago,’ said Mr. Morgan.



## CHAPTER XXXV.

Gertrude offers to put Georgey to bed—She leaves the house, but Georgey will follow—He is left in the barn—His last appeal to Gertrude—Mrs. Astley is startled in the quiet night by an alarming apparition.

**H**E two parties arrived at home almost at the same moment ; and Edith at once busied herself in making tea. Mr. Morgan did not go into the house, much to Gertrude's relief, who seemed very anxious that tea should come to an end, and the children should go to bed. Mrs. Astley at length asked her why she was in such a hurry, and she answered that she was tired.

Georgey and Alice, however, were so full of what they had seen at the fair, that they every now and then forgot all about their bread and butter, and had to be jogged on by Gertrude again and again.

‘There ! I am sure you don't want any more,’ said Gertrude at length. ‘You had better all go upstairs. I shall go too, mamma,’ she added ; ‘so good-night.’

‘Good-night, my dear child,’ said Mrs. Astley, kissing her, with delight at Gertrude's unusual goodness.

Gertrude and Georgey slept in the room with Mrs. Astley. The other children were removed from this room by a passage. Edith, little woman as she was, prepared to go into her mother's bedroom and undress Georgey as usual ; but Gertrude pushed her aside, saying, 'I can put him to bed, of course. You and the others go to your own rooms.'

But when Gertrude was alone in the bedroom with her little brother, the clock struck seven.

'Good gracious, Georgey !' said she ; 'I had no idea it was so late. Look here ; will you be a very good boy, and do as I tell you ? and to-morrow I will give you lots and lots of sweets.'

Georgey nodded his head slowly at the mention of the sweets. Gertrude had just unloosed and pulled off the child's boots.

'There,' said she, 'you can finish undressing yourself, Georgey ; can't you ?'

'I don't know,' said Georgey.

'Oh yes, you can, child,' said Gertrude, impatiently. 'Here, I will undo your belt. You can take off the rest of your things, and put on your bedgown. I cannot wait a moment. I said I would be there at half-past six. Now, Georgey, mind you're a good boy. Go to bed and go to sleep ; and remember, lots of sweets to-morrow.'

'Where you going, Gertie ?' asked Georgey, sitting on the edge of the bed without making an effort to undress himself.

'Never you mind ; I am going nowhere ; only I don't feel inclined to go to bed so early, now I am upstairs.

Make haste and go to sleep ;' and Gertrude, with her boots in her hand, gently left the bedroom, and crept down the stairs without making any noise. She knew that the entrance door was open, for she had purposely left it so when they had come in, and the night was so warm, that Mrs. Astley would not have closed it. So, like a thief, she crept along, holding her breath, and listening at every step, until she reached the garden, passed through the little gate, and then, no longer afraid of being heard, she began running rapidly through the fields. Once or twice she thought she heard footsteps running after her, but she concluded it was her own fancy. Edith and Alice would have been asleep before now ; and Gertrude was sure her mother would never dream of any deception being practised upon her, unless she was warned of it by some one else.

'Well, I hope you feel ashamed of yourself, Miss Gertrude,' exclaimed the voice of Loo Clarke, as Gertrude reached, breathless, the stile at the end of the first field. 'We have come all this distance to meet you. We thought you meant to throw us over altogether. Why, do you know it is just half an hour later than the time you agreed to be here? Carry, just look at your gold watch again, and show Gertrude that it is half-past seven.'

Gertrude had encountered this violent assault of words in silence, partly because she had little breath with which to speak, and partly because there was no pause in Miss Loo's address to give her a loophole for an answer. At length she commenced—

‘I *could* not get away. First, there was tea, and the children would be such a time about it ; and then, of course, I could not get off until they were in bed.’

‘But it is the play I am thinking of,’ interrupted Loo Clarke, in an aggrieved tone of voice. ‘You know quite well, for I told you, that the doors open at half-past seven, and it will be half over before we get there.’

‘Well, I couldn’t help it,’ answered Gertrude crossly ; ‘and I think we had much better go there as quick as we can, without wasting more time talking.’

At this moment the cause of the footsteps after Gertrude was explained. Little Georgey appeared, clad in his shirt and trousers, and holding his little tunic over one arm ; his boots were on his feet again, but the laces were streaming behind.

‘Georgey !’ exclaimed Gertrude, cross and put out by the manner in which she had been received by her friends ; ‘what do you mean by coming after me in this way ? Go back directly, you naughty, wicked boy, or I will tell mamma of you.’

‘No, you won’t,’ answered Georgey, impudently ; ‘cos if you does, I’ll tell of you ; and I can tell lots.’

Gertrude took him by the shoulder and shook him ; then, having so relieved her feelings, she turned to her companions and said, ‘What are we to do ?’

‘Little pest !’ observed Miss Clarke, giving a poke to Georgey with the end of her parasol.

‘We shall lose all the best of the play ; I know we shall,’ said Miss Loo, positively whimpering.

‘Oh, you’re going to a play, are you?’ said Georgey. ‘I guessed you was going to somewhere. I’m going too, I am.’

‘You shan’t, you nasty little thing!’

‘I ain’t a nasty little thing,’ said Georgey politely. ‘You’re a nasty thing; and you’ve got a great pimple on your nose!’

Miss Loo burst into tears. The pimple was a fact; but she did not like its being alluded to.

‘I think we had best walk on as fast as we can,’ said Miss Clarke. ‘We must take this child with us now, because we can’t help ourselves; but we shall be able to get rid of him, perhaps. Of course we can’t take him to the fair. He would be a horrid nuisance.’

Gertrude hastily put on Georgey’s tunic.

‘Never mind his boots,’ said Miss Louisa. ‘We really cannot wait;’ and she began running in the direction of the town.

Of course Georgey could not keep up such a pace for any time. He first flagged, then cried, and finally sat down on the grass, and said he would not go any farther unless he might walk.

‘Let us leave him in that barn,’ suggested Miss Clarke. ‘I daresay there is a lot of straw or something there; and we will fetch him again as we go home.’

‘I won’t be left in the barn. I won’t, I say; you nasty, ugly, fat, red-faced thing!’ said Georgey rapidly, which speech procured him a box on the ear from Miss Clarke.

‘Look here, Georgey,’ said Gertrude coaxingly. ‘We will come for you in a little while. You lie down and go to sleep, and I’ll bring you cakes and lollipops from the fair.’

‘I don’t want cakes and lollipops. I won’t be left in the barn.’

By this time Miss Clarke had taken the law into her own hands, and was carrying the refractory Georgey towards the barn, he struggling, screaming, and kicking her all the way. The child was almost breathless with passion by the time the building was reached; and for some moments he was so still that he seemed as if he had given up opposition as useless.

The barn was well enough for a barn, and, as Miss Clarke had suggested, in one corner there was a quantity of straw. Gertrude hastily made up a comfortable bed, and Miss Clarke placed the now quiet child upon it.

‘He’ll do well enough,’ said she.

But, the moment afterwards, Georgey started to his feet, and rushed towards the entrance, screaming—

‘I won’t stay here; I won’t, I won’t. I say, I won’t stop alone.’

‘You shall, you little plague; so hold your tongue directly, or I’ll tell the black bogie to come and fetch you. He is somewhere in the field now, and he’ll come if he hears you screaming,’ said Miss Louisa Clarke.

‘No! no! no! don’t tell him,’ said poor little Georgey, lying down in the straw.

‘Well, then, don’t scream any more.’

‘Gertie,’ said Georgey in a low voice, and glancing nervously from side to side; ‘Gertie, don’t *you* go and leave me all alone. Let them two go; you stay with me. Do, Gertie; do, *do*, Gertie,’ said the child, in an imploring manner.

‘Nonsense! Gertie can’t stop with you,’ answered Miss Clarke. ‘So hold your tongue, and go to sleep.’

Georgey began to cry quietly.

‘We had better go now. He will be all right,’ said Miss Clarke, moving away.

‘The play will be more than half over, I am sure, with all this delay and fuss,’ said Miss Louisa sadly.

Gertrude felt very uncomfortable. Perhaps she was more fond of little Georgey than of any one in the world; although she had shown her fondness by striving to ruin him. His appeal to her to remain with him almost touched her heart. She was herself tired with all these delays and vexations, following upon the heat and fatigue of the day, and only half inclined to go in search of more; but she was too much afraid of the Miss Clarkes to stop now and do what was right. So again she stifled her conscience, and turned a deaf ear to poor little Georgey’s sobs, which came at intervals from amidst the straw; and she left the barn with her companions, whose only anxiety now was to get to the fair as soon as possible, and make up for lost time, there being some dramatic performance to be seen in one of the booths, which the Clarkes had exalted into a ‘play.’

Mrs. Astley did not usually go to bed very early. She

had so little time for anything but needlework during the day, that her evenings were generally spent in writing letters and in reading. This evening she sat up, occupied with a book, until the clock struck eleven, when she rose to shut the hall door, which had stood open since Gertrude passed through it. As Mrs. Astley reached the door, she heard a confused noise of running feet, and every now and then an exclamation; and then, in the clear moonlight, she saw several people coming down the road, and one figure, in advance of the rest—a small, slight, girl's figure—running wildly. And, a moment afterwards, the wicket-gate of her own garden was thrown back, and Gertrude, as white as a sheet, her eyes distended with horror, her mouth open, but speechless, rushed towards her, and stopped, and said nothing, but stood as if she had lost her senses.





## CHAPTER XXXVI.

Poor Mrs. Toogood makes a frank confession—Theodora kisses her—  
Mrs. Toogood begs Theodora's pardon—What will Miss Terry  
think?—Florence Leigh begins to know herself.

**T**HERE was a new difficulty and turmoil at Prospect House. Isabel Howard took a violent dislike to the hired nurse. She would take nothing from her hands ; she once or twice actually attacked her with her nails ; so that the nurse, whose name was Mrs. Moore, declared that Isabel was more 'like to a cat, or some such venomous beast, than a young lady !'

Mrs. Toogood had hoped that Theodora would be allowed some rest, for the girl was looking pale and wan ; and no wonder, with this grief for Alfred, combined with the daily anxiety and responsibility.

But there was nothing to be done with Isabel. Self-willed as she was at all times, she was doubly so now, when she had no sense to check her natural disposition ; and she took to screaming each time Mrs. Moore approached her.

'I can do nothing with her, ma'am, and there it is,' said the nurse to Mrs. Toogood. 'I would sooner attend on half a dozen others ; but she injures herself to that degree with screaming and temper, that I cannot do justice to her.'

'Don't say temper, Mrs. Moore ; she is not responsible now, poor girl !'

'Well, ma'am, I won't say temper, if you prefer not ; but I have always found that where the temper is, there it comes out at such times as this ; and Miss Howard do seem to have more than a pretty little temper of her own, as the saying is ; but there, ma'am, as you don't wish it, I won't say temper.'

'You shall for the future, then, my good Mrs. Moore, attend to Miss Watson and Miss Lloyd, and I will again take charge of Miss Howard myself.'

'No, indeed, you shall not, Mrs. Toogood !' exclaimed Theodora ; 'you are quite unfit for anything of the sort. You look only fit to go to bed yourself. I shall nurse Isabel. Look at her, Mrs. Moore ; is she fit to sit up at night ?'

'No, that she ain't, Miss Astley. She is well-nigh knocked up already ; but you are not much better, my dear. Deary me ! this is a hard time for you all, my dears, and mostly along of that Miss Howard's temper. But there !—I say nothing.'

'Oh, I am not tired ; I am as strong as anybody,' said Theodora. 'Florence will sleep in the room with me.'

'Florence will take her turn in waiting on Isabel,' said

Mrs. Toogood, sinking back upon the sofa. She felt it was of no use resisting ; she could not go on nursing any longer. 'Go and call Miss Leigh, I would like to speak to her,' concluded Mrs. Toogood.

When Theodora returned with Florence, the nurse had left the room, and Mrs. Toogood said, 'Theodora Astley, come here.'

Theo was so astonished at Mrs. Toogood's style of address, that she must have shown it in her face. She obeyed, and had cause to be more astonished still ; for the first thing Mrs. Toogood did was to take her hand in hers.

'Theodora Astley,' said the old lady, 'I hope in years to come that you may never be placed in such a situation as that in which I am. It is a difficult position—to hear one-sided statements, and to be subjected to flattery, and pretence, and hypocrisy, and yet to act without prejudice and partiality. It is a difficult thing to be obliged to be blind and deaf to many things going on around one ; to be obliged to be formal, and precise, and unsympathizing, and to check one's natural affections and predilections.'

Theodora guessed at all to which Mrs. Toogood alluded so vaguely, and she answered with her usual simplicity, 'Is it necessary, ma'am ?'

'I have thought so, Theodora Astley,' resumed Mrs. Toogood. 'I may have been wrong, but I am too old now to change. I have seen hundreds come and go, with no more sympathy between them and me than a feeling of mutual relief at parting. I have kept in turn no less

than seventeen young persons in your position, Theodora Astley, and not one of them but looked away instead of towards me at my approach ; not one of them ever looked me full in the face and smiled, as you, my child.' And Mrs. Toogood placed her arms round the shoulders of Theodora as she stood by her, and continued, ' I have been told all sorts of things against you, Theodora, but I will not believe one of them. What did you see in the cross, stern old woman, that you should behave to her as if she was not quite devoid of human feeling—eh, girl ?'

' You were not cross and stern to me,' said Theodora.

' I was ; don't tell stories, child. I was, until I found you were unlike the rest of them ; and I got to love you against my will.'

Theodora kissed her.

' Ah !' said Mrs. Toogood, ' if others had been to me as you have, earlier in life, I might never have grown into the repulsive old woman that I am.'

' I think you are very unjust towards yourself,' said Theodora.

' Do you remember what I said to you, Theodora Astley, on the day that Isabel Howard was taken ill ?'

Theodora had almost forgotten it ; but, as the recollection came back, she blushed.

' I had not remembered it until now,' said she.

' Then do not remember it at all, my dear. I was unjust to you. I am sure I must have been ; but I would not listen to your justification. I thought myself disappointed in you also, when I believed you had dis-

to tell them ; but I have been all wrong, my dear. Do you remember all my fine plans of reformation in the school, Theo? Do you recollect the club?

‘Of course I do,’ answered Theodora. ‘I thought it such a good plan. At least your intentions then were right, Florence.’

‘It was all pride,’ said Florence sadly. ‘I would have reformed the school, but I never thought of reforming myself. I have done worse than no good, Theo ; I have set a worse example than Isabel ; for the girls expected more of me, with my first professions, and I have encouraged Isabel in every way by my weakness.’

‘It is not too late,’ observed Theodora.

‘I don’t know. I would like to leave the school. I do not feel as if I could meet all the girls again, and let them see how wrong I have been.’

‘The shortest way would be to tell them so at once,’ said Theodora.

‘Theodora,’ said Florence, ‘you have an immense amount of pluck. I wish I was as brave as you are.’





## CHAPTER XXXVII.

Gertrude is disappointed—The Miss Clarkes are joined by friends—  
The unexpected good advice—Georgey is not to be found—They  
pick up his little boots.

**B**EFORE arriving at the town, Gertrude and her companions had found, as Miss Loo Clarke had anticipated, the theatrical entertainment half over. This fact brought a fresh burst of annoyance against Georgey, who had been the cause of so much delay. Gertrude found it impossible to enjoy herself; she could not, as at other times, throw off a certain feeling of self-reproach. She kept thinking of the poor little child sobbing in the straw, and wondering whether he had fallen asleep. She worried Miss Clarke by her frequent demands to look at that young person's 'gold watch,' until Miss Clarke, whose temper was at no time the sweetest, exclaimed in an irritable manner—

'There! this is the last time I'll tell you. It is only a little more than half-past eight; and you may ask and ask till you're black in the face, I shan't take out my gold watch any more.'

She spoke in a loud tone of voice, and I suppose the

tempting words, 'gold watch,' were irresistible to some of the bystanders; for the next time Miss Clarke wished to consult her timepiece, which was not for some hours afterwards, she found that it was gone for ever.

But those intervening hours were of too great importance in their results to be quickly passed over.

'Half-past eight!' exclaimed Gertrude. 'Then we must begin to go home; it will take us half an hour, and I must be in by nine.'

'Why? What humbug!' exclaimed Miss Clarke. 'Your mother does not go to bed at nine, I know.'

'No; but the hall door may be shut; and then how should I get in? Besides, Georgey.'

'Bother Georgey! I shan't go home for ever so long, I can tell you,' said Miss Loo. 'Why, we are only beginning to enjoy ourselves.'

'But I don't like it,' urged Gertrude; 'the people are all so rude, and they swear so; and the men push against me.'

'Oh, well, if you are such fine bones, you had better not have come,' said Miss Clarke.

The crowd was, of course, composed of vulgar men and noisy servant girls—very fit company for the Miss Clarkes, but very unsuitable to Gertrude Astley, or any young lady; and every moment she felt more and more that she ought not to be there. Her face burnt with shame, and annoyance, and heat; and she was ready to cry when a rude man paid her some loud-spoken compliment, at which both the Miss Clarkes burst out laughing.

They had met some young men of their acquaintance,—

the same young butcher and linendraper of whom we had heard before,—and they were now talking and screaming in a way which made Gertrude perfectly ashamed. She was so silent, that the young butcher strove to enliven her by addressing some of his conversation to her; but he could get no answer to his remarks.

‘She’s sulky! Law! let her alone, Mr. Watson, do !’ said Miss Clarke, giggling.

‘I shall go home,’ said Gertrude.

‘You can’t do that alone, Miss,’ answered Mr. Watson. ‘You had best wait until these ladies is ready.’

‘And they ain’t ready, not these two hours !’ exclaimed Miss Loo, shouting.

‘I think it is very unkind of you not to go,’ said Gertrude. At that moment the town clock struck.

‘There’s nine o’clock, I declare.’

‘Ten, Miss,’ said a man in front, civilly turning round.

‘Not ten ! oh, it can’t be ten !’ cried Gertrude. Then turning to Miss Clarke, she said, ‘Why, the last time you looked at your watch, you said it was only half-past eight.’

‘No, I didn’t. I said, Only *a little more* than half-past eight ; that meant half-past nine, of course,’ said Miss Clarke, winking her eye triumphantly at Mr. Watson.

Now it so happened that this was an honest and kind-hearted young butcher ; and when he saw the distress of Gertrude, he felt disgusted with the conduct of the Clarkes.

‘If you will allow me,’ said he respectfully to Gertrude, ‘I will see you home. A young lady could not walk alone at this time through the town, so full of idle fellows as it is.’

Gertrude thanked him, and awkwardly enough accepted his offer, for she did not know what else to do. There was nothing vulgar about Mr. Watson. He was not ashamed of being a butcher; and an honest, kind-hearted man, in whatever station, is to be respected.

‘Oh come, I do call that a shame!’ said Miss Louisa Clarke, when she understood Mr. Watson’s intention; ‘and not much like a gentleman neither, to go off with one, and leave the other ladies alone. What are me and Carry to do here by ourselves?’ For Mr. Stone, the other young man, had moved away.

‘I am afraid there is nothing for it but that we should all go home, Miss,’ answered Mr. Watson. The Clarkes looked sulky; but when Mr. Watson added, ‘I think you have seen pretty well all that there is to be seen—the show booths are closing already,’ they agreed with a rather bad grace.

They fancied they would pay off their admirer, as they chose to consider Mr. Watson, by taking each other’s arms and marching off in front; every now and then looking back and saying something which they considered smart, and which, they thought, would induce him to join them. But he kept his place steadily by Gertrude, to whom he was talking in a low, serious tone; and what do you think he was saying? Why, these are the words of the young butcher:

‘I am afraid, Miss Astley, that you will be one day sorry to have become so intimate with those two girls, the Clarkes. Perhaps your mamma does not know what sort

of girls they are, or I am sure a lady like her would not have allowed you to go to the fair in the evening with them. You know, Miss Astley, a fair is all very well once in a way. I enjoy a fair myself—none more ; but, if you'll excuse my making so bold, it is not just the place for a young lady, and you the daughter of the late rector,—that is, so late in the evening.'

'Mamma does not know that I am here,' answered Gertrude.

'Oh ! I am sorry to hear that, Miss Astley,' answered Mr. Watson ; 'very sorry. You shouldn't—really you should not have come on the sly. I know it is all the doings of the Clarkes ; but, Miss Astley, these girls are no fit friends for a young lady like yourself. I am sure they are not.'

Gertrude was surprised at such a speech coming from a young butcher like Mr. Watson. She had not imagined that he considered the Clarkes other than young ladies ; but such men are as good judges as any of such a difference, and Mr. Watson had never taken the Miss Clarkes for anything but what they were—very vulgar and assumptive young women.

They were getting near the field where they had left little Georgey, and Gertrude told her companion where they had left the child. He looked surprised, but said nothing, and presently they reached the barn.

'He is here, amongst the straw,' said Gertrude, going to the corner of the barn.

But Georgey was not there.

‘Where can he be? Georgey, where are you? Georgey!’ called Gertrude.

‘Why, we left him here!’ said Miss Clarke, turning over the heap of straw again and again, as if Georgey was the size of a mouse, and she expected to find him somewhere underneath it.

‘He can’t be there; he must have run out,’ said Mr. Watson. ‘He has gone home, most likely.’

‘Won’t there be a precious row, then?’ observed Miss Louisa. ‘I’m glad I ain’t you, Gertrude, that’s all!’

Gertrude gave no answer; she felt frightened at the disappearance of the child.

‘I do not see that there is anything to be done but to go home, Miss,’ said Mr. Watson. ‘Your little brother is, no doubt, there.’

It was a very bright moonlight night, bright enough to see any object for some yards round. As they left the barn, Miss Louisa Clarke exclaimed—

‘Why, if there isn’t one of the stupid little booby’s boots! I remember they was unlaced. He’ve been and dropped it.’

She went to where the little boot lay, as she spoke, and picked it up.

‘That is not the way home,’ said Gertrude.

Mr. Watson walked on in silence, the others following him. Two or three yards further was another little boot. He picked it up, but never said a word, and went on.

‘Where do you think he is gone? Why should he go

this way? This is not the way home,' said Gertrude, more and more frightened.

Mr. Watson still gave no answer, but walked across the field. He knew what was at the other end of the field, and a horrid feeling came over him, which he tried to shake off, by calling, at intervals, 'Georgey! Georgey!' but there came no answer. No wonder that, when the spot was reached, Gertrude turned and rushed towards her mother's house, with her eyes staring with terror, and her face ghastly white!





## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

Georgey's first sleep is disturbed—Wakes in terror—He remembers Miss Clarke's threat—What it was that made Gertrude rush home so wildly to her mother—Mrs. Astley's tenderness to her—The Miss Clarke's dismissal—Gertrude again gives way to the impulse of the moment—The thunderstorm.

**G**EORGEY had fallen asleep from exhaustion and crying, shortly after Gertrude and her friends had left him. The barn in which he had been left was built rather near to the road, so that sounds from there could be easily heard. On such a night as this, with the country full of vagrants and pleasure-seekers, it was likely that the road would be noisier than usual, and Georgey's first sleep was often disturbed, although not actually broken, by the passers-by; but after the poor child had slept off his first great fatigue, about half-past nine o'clock, he was suddenly wakened by a loud shout, which seemed to him close at hand. It proceeded from a party of men who had spent too long a time at the public-house; but Georgey had not sufficient sense or consciousness to account for such things. He started up, and listened, and trembled. As he opened his eyes, they fell

upon the strange scene in which he was—the rafters of the barn above him ; the broad moonlight streaming in through a hole in the roof ; an old cart in one corner ; and the heaps of straw around him.

‘ Oh ! where am I ? where am I ? ’ cried Georgey, quite forgetting the events of the few hours before.

At the moment there came another loud rude shout from the road, and Georgey gave a scream. His own scream frightened him so, being echoed by the walls of the barn, that he shrieked again. Then, all at once, the foolish threat of Miss Clarke came back to his mind. He remembered all that had passed ; how they and Gertrude had left him there alone ; how they had told him to be still and not to scream, for if he screamed, the black bogie would come after him.

Poor little Georgey stared about him, and listened, for he fully believed Miss Clarke’s wicked threat, and he had screamed. Then the men in the road shouted their tipsy shout, and hallooed to one another ; and the child, placing his hands to his ears, called out, ‘ The black bogie ! oh, the black bogie ! ’ and, rushing from the barn, he sped across the field, never looking where he ran. How could he, when his head was continually turned over his shoulder, and his little terrified face was looking for the bogie, whatever that might be ?

On he ran, dropping his unlaced boots as he went, and never stopping to pick them up. On he ran, until his running was suddenly brought to a pause ; for Georgey had reached the brink of a pond, which was at that end

of the field, and had tripped over the edge, and fallen headlong into the water.

It was the sight of his little socked feet which first caught Gertrude's eyes, as she followed Mr. Watson to the pond, sticking up out of the water, the only part of him to be seen.

She stood near as Mr. Watson dragged the dead child out of the pond and laid him upon the grass,—his little pale face seeming to reproach her for having left him; and the recollection of his last entreaty to her to stay with him, and the echo of his sobs as she had heard them when turning away to go to her own idle amusement, came back to her mind.

‘I have killed him! It is I who have killed him!’ said Gertrude, in such a voice of horror as made even Mr. Watson turn from his useless efforts to revive the child to look at her.

‘What nonsense you do talk, Gertrude!’ exclaimed Miss Clarke, who had been occupied, from the moment of the discovery of Georgey’s body, in loud lamentations and exclamations of horror in every possible key. ‘I wish you would not say such horrible things. You have had nothing to do with killing him. You did not throw him into the water, I suppose; and, besides, he isn’t dead.’

Then it was that Gertrude turned, without giving any answer to Miss Clarke, and ran towards her mother’s cottage, and arrived, as we have seen, looking more like a dead creature, in the fixed expression of her face, than did little Georgey, who was very little altered by death.

The two Miss Clarkes renewed their howlings, mixed with expressions of surprise at Gertrude's absurdity, until Mr. Watson turned round to them and said sharply—

‘I wish you would leave off all that noise, and make yourselves of some use, you girls. Run to Mr. Morgan and tell him what has happened through your folly, and I will carry the child to his house at once; and the other of you, run after Miss Astley, and prevent her from telling her poor mother all about this suddenly. Come, make haste! ’

Mr. Watson was already on his feet, with Georgey in his arms; but he had not taken the proper way to make the Miss Clarkes hasten themselves.

‘Our folly indeed!’ exclaimed Miss Louisa, in a high voice. ‘You’ll be saying next, I suppose, that we were the cause of the child’s death. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, and that you ought, Mr. Watson. It’s cruel and eartless, that it is;’ and Miss Louisa began to sob.

‘My good girl,’ said Mr. Watson, ‘I can’t stop to talk to you about it now; but really this is not a time to quarrel about words. If you won’t go, I cannot wait;’ and Mr. Watson left the field.

Then the two Miss Clarkes set off running, but not sufficiently soon to overtake Gertrude, who never stopped until she stood before her mother.

‘My child! my dear child! what is it?’ said Mrs. Astley, who, in her surprise at seeing Gertrude’s state of terror, forgot the strangeness of seeing her there at all at that hour of the night.

But Gertrude did not speak. She pointed back over her shoulder, and shivered, and stared her mother in the face. Then Mrs. Astley took the girl in her arms, and led her into the house, and placed her on the sofa, and fondled her, and asked her again what had frightened her so.

Whether Gertrude, when she first started home, did so with the intention of telling her mother about Georgey's death, I do not know. But now she said nothing of it. And, I think, as she saw that poor careworn face, which had never looked at her excepting in love, looking now so wistfully and earnestly into her own, that if she had meant to blurt it out, she forbore in pity, and felt that she could not tell.

Then the Miss Clarkes' two faces appeared at the open door; for they had followed one the other like sheep, instead of attending to Mr. Watson's directions. Gertrude saw them, and whether she feared their awkward, indelicate way of telling the fearful news, or whether the sight of these girls, who had led her astray, who had estranged her from her mother, and been the cause of her becoming the wretched girl she was at that moment, irritated her beyond control, she started from the sofa, the colour for the moment returned to her face, her eyes flashed with anger, and she exclaimed—

'Do not come here, either of you. Do not speak a word. Leave this room and this house immediately! I want nothing more to do with you. Go! I wish never more to see either of you again.'

*The Intimacy with the Clarkes ends. 305*

‘Well !’ commenced Miss Clarke.

‘Do not speak to me. Do not come a step nearer. I have known you too long, and I will know you or see you no more,’ said Gertrude. ‘Go ! go this instant ! Would to God I had never seen you in my life !’

The Miss Clarkes looked half frightened, but they did as they were told. It was only when they had passed the garden gate, and were out of hearing, that they let their tongues loose, and commented upon Gertrude’s very ‘rude and vulgar behaviour.’

We have done with the Miss Clarkes, I am glad to say ; and so I will here mention that, during following events, they made no attempts to renew their intimacy with Gertrude Astley, but took refuge in laughing about her behind her back, with those who were willing to laugh. From this evening their acquaintance with young Watson came to an end, I think by mutual consent. They were half afraid of him, as they were of all people whom they classed as ‘good ;’ and certainly the Miss Clarkes were not good enough for him, honest-hearted young fellow as he was.

Gertrude turned to her mother, when the Miss Clarkes were gone, with a piteous, appealing look.

Again Mrs. Astley said, ‘What is it, my child ? Tell me what has happened ;’ and then, recollecting herself, ‘How came you out of the house at this hour, my dear?’

‘Oh mother ! mother !’ said Gertrude, ‘I am a very miserable girl.’

And then a flood of tears came to relieve her poor

burning head ; and Mrs. Astley would not further question her, thinking that she should know all in time, and thanking God in her heart that her naughty child was being brought to her right mind. Gertrude lay down on the sofa, holding her mother's hand in hers, and moaning at intervals all the night through, and then calling out what a wicked girl she had been, and begging her mother not to hate her. Towards morning she seemed exhausted with her grief, and Mrs. Astley hoped she might go to sleep ; but there was no sleep for Gertrude, with the memory of little Georgey's face as he had been dragged out of the pond.

As daylight increased, little Edith, with her notable housewifely habits, rose and dressed herself, and then went into her mother's room, then came running down-stairs all astonishment, and stood at the door, and asked—

‘Where's mamma and Gertrude? Oh! there you both are. And where's Georgey? Why, mamma, what's the matter? where's Georgey? Gertie! what has come to Gertie?’

For Gertrude had screamed and started from the sofa, and now lay on the floor like a dead girl. Mrs. Astley knew too soon where Georgey was. She was still attending to poor Gertrude, when Mr. Morgan himself arrived. No efforts had been of any use in reviving Georgey. The child had suffocated in the water ; and Mr. Morgan came to break the fact to his mother.

How he did so I do not know ; I only know that Mrs.

Astley's first impulse was naturally to go to the dead body of her baby, and that she took Mr. Morgan's arm, and walked to his house. Even the doctor was surprised at the calmness shown by Mrs. Astley, usually a woman of by no means strong nerves; but Gertrude's unexpected illness had in a way nerved her for worse. She left Gertrude in charge of Edith; but she had not been gone many minutes when Gertrude said—

‘I do not want any one with me, Edie; go and dress Alice,’ for Alice had been shouting for help for some minutes.

Then, when Edith was gone, Gertrude got up from the sofa, and pressed her hands upon her forehead, and then she gave a cry, and ran out of the open door of the house, and through the garden and the fields. As she did so, a loud clap of thunder came, and large drops of rain began to fall slowly; but this did not stop her. Out into the rain she ran, faster and faster, as if she could by running escape the miserable thoughts which were in her mind. And presently the heavens were rent asunder by the lightning, and the thunder roared, and echoed round the country, and the few drops of rain increased to a violent shower; but still Gertrude ran on.

Her light summer dress was soaked through; but she thought nothing of that. She ran through field after field, until, from mere exhaustion, she fell down upon the grass, and lay moaning and groaning in the agony of her spirit, trembling at every fresh burst of thunder as it rolled over her head, as if it were the voice of God

specially sent to her in his wrath, and trying to shut out the lightning from her eyes, and the remembrance of the past from her mind.

Oh ! Georgey, Georgey ! that little dead face !—will it ever be forgotten, so long as Gertrude lives ? Those sobs and entreaties to her to stay !—will the sound of them ever die away ?

When Gertrude was missed and sought for, it was a long time before she could be found. After a search, she was discovered lying upon the grass, drenched through with the heavy rain, almost stupefied with terror and grief. From her wild, incoherent speeches, one would have thought that she had actually murdered little Georgey ; and it was not until Mr. Morgan had sought the Miss Clarkes, and insisted upon knowing the truth of the case, that he learnt what share Gertrude had had in the wrong-doing of the evening before. The Miss Clarkes at first denied all knowledge of Georgey's movements, until, in company with Gertrude and Mr. Watson, they had discovered him in the pond. Next, upon Mr. Morgan saying that he should inquire further of Mr. Watson, Miss Louisa admitted that the child had run after them, but attempted to lay all the blame of Georgey's having been left in the barn upon Gertrude.

Mr. Morgan in disgust was about to leave them ; but, before going, threw out a hint that they would be forced to tell the truth when summoned upon the inquest. Thereupon Louisa Clarke, with the ignorant fear of anything to do with a magistrate, told everything she

knew, not omitting the threat of the black bogie used by Miss Carry ; for which gratuitous piece of information she received from her sister a smart box on the ear, and Mr. Morgan left them vigorously quarrelling together.

Gertrude, upon being taken home, had an attack of fever ; and all this while Theodora knew nothing of what was passing at home, and her mother had not the heart to tell her the miserable events which had followed so quickly one upon the other.





## CHAPTER XXXIX.

Isabel Howard's consciousness returns—She asks to be taught to be good—Theodora is called upon to preach the gospel—An old friend—The dead come to life again—Theodora learns all the news of home—Again she asks Mrs. Toogood for leave of absence.

NE day Isabel woke up, with her head clear and her mind right. She looked fixedly at Theodora for a moment. As for Theodora, she had of late days come to look upon Isabel as such a creature to be coaxed, and petted, and nursed, that I doubt if she quite identified her with the outrageous Isabel of former times.

‘What is it, dear? Will you have something to drink?’ asked Theodora, gently.

But Isabel turned her head away, and cried, with her face hidden in the pillow.

She never expressed any surprise at seeing Theodora by her bedside; but often, after looking at her, she would, as in this case, turn away her head and cry, and once she suddenly seized Theodora’s hand as it passed her, and kissed it. Then Theo took Isabel in her arms and

kissed her face, as any woman would, who had her hand kissed by another woman—and, remember, these two girls were grown almost into women, if not quite—and Isabel would then cry again, but she never said anything.

Isabel seemed always crying, which was so unlike her old self that Theodora went to Mrs. Toogood and spoke about it.

‘I do not wonder at her crying, my dear,’ said Mrs. Toogood, ‘when she has you waiting and attending on her. But, supposing we were to take her somewhere for change—to the seaside?’

So it was settled that the whole establishment should move to Worthing, while the house was thoroughly aired and disinfected.

Isabel received the news of the change with the greatest apathy. Her weakness had taken a new phase. She was miserable without Theodora. She would hold Theodora’s hand in hers for hours, incapacitating the latter from anything like employment; for, of course, Isabel’s old selfish nature still remained. Selfishness is the hardest and most lingering vice to get rid of. But still she never said anything.

After a time the move was made to Worthing. If no one else enjoyed the change, Theodora did thoroughly. They were sitting all day long upon the beach, recreation being a duty; and it is so pleasant, when conscience goes with enjoying one’s self, as it does at such times.

One morning Theodora was so sitting—Isabel, as always now, holding her hand in hers—when, for the first time, Isabel spoke of something more than commonplaces.

‘Theodora,’ said she suddenly, and looking the while far out across the sea, ‘will you teach me to be good?’

‘I cannot teach you, Isabel; it is only God can teach that,’ said Theodora.

‘I am tired of being wicked,’ said Isabel; ‘it is so wretched to be so afraid to die. You would not be afraid, would you, if you were going to die?’

‘I think not,’ said Theodora.

‘That is because you are good,’ said Isabel. ‘I have read about good people in books; but I thought they were all invention, and only put into books. I see now that people can really be good. Do you remember how I was the first to give you the nickname of Saint Theodora?’

‘Never mind that now, dear.’

‘I have been thinking lately that you deserved the name, but not in mockery; although I never at any time thought you a humbug, although I disliked you.’

‘Why did you dislike me, Isabel?’

‘The old reason—because you were good and I was wicked.’

‘I wish you would not call me good.’

‘It does not matter; I should think you so, whether I call you so or not. I wish you would teach me how to be good also.’

Then Theodora tried to do what every one of us may be called upon to do sooner or later—to preach the gospel which she had practised to another. She could not use any fine language, any more than you could, perhaps; but she tried to tell Isabel as plainly as she

could how the love of Christ is the only true principle of conduct. Isabel had read all this a hundred times over, and had heard it as often ; but she never listened to it, or remembered it, until it was told her in very indifferent language from a fellow school-girl, and then she listened to it with so much earnestness, that she never forgot it again. While they were so talking, a stout old gentleman came and stood near them and looked at them. There were so many stout old gentlemen about Worthing, as there are everywhere, that neither Theodora nor Isabel glanced towards him ; but he presently came and stood nearer, and then he said—

‘Well, Miss Theodora, and so you take no notice of me ! I have a better memory than you have, you see.’

Theodora looked up quickly, for she knew the voice, and there was the Duke of X— ! She started to her feet and held out her hand ; the next moment her arm dropped again to her side, and she gave a piercing scream, for a lad in naval uniform ran up to the Duke, exclaiming, ‘So you have been the first to find her, after all, sir !’ and that boy was her brother Alfred.

‘Oh, Alf ! oh, Alf !’ said Theodora, crying as she had never cried when she thought she had lost him. ‘Oh, my dear brother ! oh, my dear Alfred !’

‘Why, Theo,’ said Alfred, ‘what is all this row about ? I thought you would have been glad to see me after all that has happened. And then to meet a fellow in such a queer sort of way. What’s the matter, Theo ? Do say something more than that.’

'I thought you were dead,' said Theodora, explaining it all in one sentence.

'So did everybody, and so did I myself, only that I could not think at all until I came to life again. But surely you got mother's letter?'

'I have not heard from home for the last ten days,' said Theodora. 'I have been wondering why mamma did not write; but she may have written to Prospect House since we left—that is several days ago.'

'And what did mamma say in her last letter?' asked Alfred.

'Only that every one was well, and that I was not to worry myself about home. She has never mentioned your name, Alf, since the first letter she wrote in answer to mine after I had read that dreadful thing in the newspaper; and of course I did not speak of you, thinking it would only revive her sorrow. I have no doubt it was hard enough for her to bear, and I could not go to her because of this fever.'

'She wrote to you all about me, and how I was picked up, and rubbed and scrubbed into life again; and how I rushed down to Chatterton, like a fool, as I am, and burst in upon her at tea-time, and sent her half out of her wits. I know she did, Theo; for I posted the letter myself.'

That letter, as we know, had gone into the fire, all through that stupid, meddlesome Letitia Jones.

'But now, Theo,' resumed Alfred, 'are not you glad that I am alive again? Eh!'

'Alf!'

'Then what are you still piping your eye about, you silly old girl?' asked he.

'Tell me all about it, Alfred. I have heard nothing, remember.'

Then Alfred became grave as he told how he had been dragged under water by his drowning companion, and had believed that his last moment had come ; of all the gasping pain of being brought back to consciousness, and his horror at finding that the account of the accident had got into the newspapers, and how he had thought to be beforehand with the news by going home to his mother.

'Fancy, Theo,' he concluded, looking, as he spoke, far out over the sea,—'fancy the other two being drowned, and I only of the three rescued! It must be for some purpose, I suppose. God must have spared my life for some reason ; must He not, Theo?'

'Yes, Alfred ; because He intends you to live to his service,' answered Theodora.

'And so you never had mother's letter?' said Alfred again presently. 'It must have been cruel work for you, poor little Theo ; and with all this fever, and nothing but sick, cross people about you. And you say you have not heard now for ten days?'

'Not for ten days. How are they all, Alfred?'

'Well, that is the reason I came to look for you here, Theo. The fact is,'—commenced Alfred ; 'what a fool I am!—the fact is, Theo—I must tell you it out at once—Gertie is not well.'

Alfred had been sent to Worthing with the object of breaking to Theodora, as quietly as possible, the late events of the family.

Before many minutes Theodora knew all about little Georgey's death, and Gertrude's grief; and Alfred was repeating, in order to comfort her—

'But you have me, you know, Theo. A little while ago you thought I was dead; and now you have me given back to you, as it were.'

Whilst Alfred and Theodora had been talking together, the old Duke had amused himself with Isabel, who indulged him with a long account of Theodora's behaviour during the time of the fever.

'Well, Miss Theodora,' said he, when she and Alfred came and stood near them, 'so you have grown quite into a young woman, I see; but you have still an opinion of your own, I fancy, by the expression of your face. Has Alfred told you all about home?'

'Yes.'

'It is very sad, is it not? That sister of yours seems to be a self-willed little lady.'

'I wish I might go home,' said Theodora, 'if it was not for this fever.'

'What good would you do yourself by going home?' asked the Duke.

'I was thinking of mamma,' said Theodora.

'That's right; always think of somebody else, and don't take care of yourself.'

'But,' commenced Alfred, 'you know, my dear sir.'

'I don't know at all, my dear monkey,' answered the old gentleman. 'It seems to me that Miss Theodora looks very pale and thin; and I think, after the account which this young lady here has been giving me of her late exertions, that your sister had much better rest and enjoy herself instead of going nursing again.'

'If it were not for the children,' commenced Theodora.

'But that is all settled,' said Alfred.

'It is not settled at all; and during the last few minutes I have changed my mind,' said the Duke of X—.

'What?—what was settled?' asked Theodora.

'Why,' commenced Alfred, 'that the children—'

'Hold your tongue, Albert.'

'I don't recognise that name, sir—that the children are all to go to Mrs. Haynes'—'

'If you go on, I'll have nothing more to do with you,' said the Duke of X—, laughing.

'To Mrs. Haynes' farm-house; and you, Theo, are to go back home with me, because mother can't do without you any longer.'

'I am so glad!' said Theodora.

'There's a dutiful godson!' said the Duke.

Whereupon Isabel Howard, in her weakness, began to cry.

'Ah! well,' said the Duke of X—, 'it must be something to be indispensable on one hand, and cried after on the other.'

Theodora went straight to Mrs. Toogood, and asked leave to go home.



## CHAPTER XL.

Gertrude's strange reception of her sister ; her despairing condemnation of herself—A mother's love—Theodora is left alone with Edith—The gravestone—Theodora makes the little girl her confidant.

**H**E children had been removed from the chance of infection, and Theodora returned home to her mother and Gertrude only. Alfred had no more leave than just to see his sister safely to Chatterton, and then he rejoined his ship. Mrs. Astley had not told Gertrude of her sister's probable return ; as, so long as Theodora's coming was uncertain, she was afraid of disappointing Gertrude in her present weak, excitable state. Now when, to Mrs. Astley's great pleasure, Theodora had arrived, she went to tell the news to Gertrude ; and, to her surprise, found her sitting up in bed, listening and trembling.

‘Who is it?’ asked Gertrude ; ‘tell me, who is it?’

‘Why, who should you imagine, my dear?’ asked her mother in return. ‘Who should we wish most to see?’

‘It is not Theo!’ exclaimed Gertrude, looking terrified.

'Of course it is Theo. She has come to help to make you well again, my love.'

'Oh! I cannot see her,' said Gertrude, falling back upon the pillow, with her eyes closed, while the tears slowly made their way from under the lids. 'I dare not see her, mother. Tell her I cannot see her.' But Theodora, all unknowing of what was going on, had followed her mother upstairs, and now stood at the door. She saw that Gertrude was lying quietly upon the pillow, and she went into the room, and, bending over her, she kissed her.

Gertrude opened her eyes, and screamed, and raised her hands, as if to put away Theodora from her.

'What is it, mother? what can it be?' asked Theodora.

'Gertrude dear, what has come between us? Are you not glad to see me?'

'I am not fit to see you! I am not fit to be touched by you. You don't know me, Theo; you don't know me, mother. Oh, mamma! mamma!' said Gertrude, stretching out her arms to her mother. 'Kiss me again; love me for a little while before I tell you all. I have been a bad girl to you; I have been insolent and disobedient. I have added to your troubles instead of helping you to bear them; but it has all come upon my own head now. God has begun to punish me for my wickedness, as He will punish me for ever; and I deserve it.' She placed her hands over her face and shuddered.

'Gertrude dear,' said Mrs. Astley, 'do you think that I ever ceased to love you for a moment? However disobedient you may have been, it is all forgiven and for-

gotten now. I know you will be disobedient no longer ; let what is past be past, my child.'

' Mamma, you do not know ; Theo, you do not know ; when you do, you will hate me. You will not look kindly at me then, or love me then. I killed Georgey ! Yes ; I see you start,' for her mother had in her surprise changed her position and countenance. ' I killed the baby ! my own little brother ! my own dear little brother !' wailed Gertrude.

' Gertie,' said Theodora, for she saw her mother could not speak, ' you are deluding yourself into this idea through your weakness. You forget ; dear little Georgey was drowned.'

' I forget nothing. Oh, I wish I could ! I wish I could forget !' said Gertrude. ' Do you think I delude myself into the idea that I made the child deceive mamma time after time—that I left him to undress himself, when I pretended to go to bed—that I shut him up in a barn alone, while I went to that horrid fair—that I left him, poor little thing, frightened, and sobbing, and begging me to stay ? I tell you it was I who killed him, as much as if I had thrown him in the pond ; and God will require his blood at my hands ! Oh ! mother, I do not wonder that you turn away from me now.' For Mrs. Astley had laid her face upon the bed, so as to hide her tears.

' I do not turn away from you, my child. In all your wickedness,—for you are right, you have been very wicked, Gertrude,—I love you better than I ever did. Do you think your own mother would shut her heart against you, in your sorrow and repentance ?'

Gertrude threw herself upon her mother's breast and cried, until, from mere exhaustion, she cried herself to sleep. Then Mrs. Astley laid her on the pillow, and, taking Theodora round the waist, she said—

‘Come down-stairs with me, and talk over these things, my own good girl. Ah ! Theo, it is impossible to destroy a mother's love, even in such a case as that of Gertrude ; but it is such times of disappointment and sorrow that make us value more than ever a child such as you have always been to me.’

‘I have done nothing, mother. I could not help loving you, you know,’ said Theodora.

‘Why has not Gertrude loved me also ? I have loved her well enough—too well, perhaps, Theo—before I knew you, my child, as I do now.’

Then it was true that at one time Mrs. Astley had not loved Theodora so well as the other ! It did not matter now that she saw her mistake, and Theodora only answered—

‘Poor, dear mamma, it must be very hard for you to bear ; but Gertrude will be different now. I am sure she is sorry. She will never behave so badly again.’ And Theodora, in order to divert her mother's thoughts from the distressing subject, began to talk of Mrs. Toogood, and all her kindness to herself, and of the recent events at Prospect House. She dreaded any allusion to Georgey ; and yet her heart ached whenever she ceased talking for a moment, as she thought of the little dead body lying upstairs.

The funeral was to take place upon the following day,

and there was enough to do to get their mourning in order, in time to wear it on the morrow.

When Mrs. Astley had had some tea, she rose to return to Gertrude ; and then Theodora called Edith to her. The child had, while her little hands were busy, been continually gazing at Theodora with astonishment. She could not imagine why her sister did not cry. But she left off wondering when her mother left the room, and Theodora called her to come to her ; for she put her arms round Edith's neck, and cried as if her heart would break.

Little Edith had heard the servant maid attempt to comfort her mistress, during Mrs. Astley's first grief after Georgey's death ; and now Mary Anne's expressions were made use of at second hand.

‘There ! there ! don't take on, Theo ; don't give way, Theo ; it is what we must all come to, you know. Please, don't take on !’

‘No, I won't, you dear little woman,’ said Theodora ; ‘I won't take on ; only I felt as if I must cry, now I am alone. Edith, I want to see him. It is not—the coffin is not shut down yet, is it ?’

‘I will take you,’ said Edith, with an important air ; and she led the way to the room which had been Theodora's whilst she was yet at home, and where now the baby boy's little body was lying in its coffin.

‘Poor little Georgey ! dear little brother !’ moaned Theodora ; and she stood looking at the little face, which was as pretty and calm as if Georgey had been asleep. Then Theodora turned to Edith, and said to the child—

for her heart was so full that she felt as if she must speak to whoever was with her at the time—‘ Edie, how can we cry over him ? He is gone to be with God and with papa ! Oh ! you happy little child, you have more cause to cry over us who are left. O my God ! how long ? If I could only be with you, Georgey, and all this trouble and this weariness at an end !’

Was this a girl of eighteen who was speaking of the trouble and weariness of life, when life was only opening upon her ?

Little Edith went to her sister and took her hand. ‘ Do not ask God to let you die too, Theo,’ she said ; ‘ what would we all do if you were dead ? what would poor mamma do then ?’

No, Theodora, Edith is right. It is cowardly to wish to die, and wrong in you to feel afraid of what life may have in store for you ; but it is a feeling which very often comes over the young when looking, as Theodora was looking now, at a dead face. Depend upon it, the greatest honour God can put upon us is to let us live, and give us work to do for Him.

Theodora felt this shortly afterwards, and asked God’s forgiveness for her rash cry.

‘ Theo,’ said little Edith presently, ‘ where will little Georgey be buried—with papa ?’

‘ Yes, I suppose so, Edie.’

‘ Oh ! I wish papa had a tombstone, Theo. Do you know, since you went away, Mr. Stevenson has died, and he has a tombstone also ? Every time I see any one with a tombstone, Theo, I think what a shame it is that papa

should not have one yet ; and I feel ashamed of walking through the churchyard—I do indeed, Theo.'

'There is no need, Edie,' Theodora answered. 'There is no shame in mamma's being poor, and unable to afford a tombstone.'

'But, Theo, you know all about the Duke, and how kind he is to Alfred. Well, the other day, when Alf was at home, he said that if the Duke knew that papa had no tombstone, he would put one up directly ; and I asked Alf to tell him, but he said he would not.'

'Alf was quite right,' said Theodora. 'Now, Edie, if you can keep a secret, I'll tell you something.'

'Of course I can, Theo ; I am not a child,' answered Edith, looking as old as she could. 'Tell me ; what is it ?'

Theodora took from her pocket a letter, and with it a paper with sketches of various tombstones. She opened the latter, and spread it out upon her knee. 'Look, Edie,' said she, 'I like this one the most, and I believe mamma would also.'

'And so should I,' said Edie, 'because it is much better than Mr. Stevenson's, or indeed than any in the churchyard.'

'Never mind Mr. Stevenson's now, dear. I think mamma would like it ; so, suppose we fix upon this one. I think it would please her to find it put up without her knowledge. I know exactly what she would have written upon it, because she told me one day what she would have liked, and I remember the exact words.'

'But Georgey,' objected Edith.

'Yes ; mamma ought to be asked about that.'

‘And then it will all come out, Theo,’ said Edith, ‘and there will be no more surprise.’

‘Well, wait a little, Edie, dear. We will think about it.’

‘That is always the way. “Wait a little,” and “think about it,”’ said Edith. ‘I am sure I wish there was no such thing as waiting in the world.’

‘And no such thing as thinking either, I suppose, Edie?’

‘But, Theodora,’ exclaimed Edith, suddenly, ‘how will you can get enough money? This stone is marked four pounds, ten shillings. I have been saving up for it ever so long; but that is such a dreadful quantity of money!’

‘I have got the money, Edith; I have made it all myself,’ said Theodora, her eyes glistening with pleasure. ‘And so you have been saving up too, you dear little girl! How much have you saved?’

‘I have sevenpence,’ said Edith; ‘that is something, you know. You will let me help, won’t you, Theodora? We may put it up together, you and I; may not we?’

‘Yes, of course, dear,’ said her sister, feeling more disposed to cry at the little girl’s earnestness, than to laugh at her contribution towards the fund.

That evening Mrs. Astley—curiously, it seemed to Theodora—commenced speaking on the subject, without anything leading especially to it.

‘Theo,’ said she, ‘of course you know, my dear, that I would long ago have put some stone over your dear father’s grave, but for the want of money. I have never had so much as a five-pound note to spare since he left us.’

‘Yes, dear mamma, we all know it; and papa himself knows it,’ said Theodora.

‘But people might think, my child—’

‘My dear mother, what does it signify what people think?’ interrupted Theodora brusquely.

‘It does signify, Theo, to a certain extent,’ answered Mrs. Astley; ‘and I believe it is our duty to avoid misconstruction as far as we can. The reason I spoke to you about it is this, my dear. If, at any future time, you or Alfred should have it in your power to do what I have longed to do, I should like some such words as these to be engraven on the stone.’

Theodora flushed crimson as her mother gave her a paper, on which was written a short inscription to her father’s memory, followed by a notice of little Georgey.

‘And as to me,’ continued Mrs. Astley, ‘you may put what you please underneath that in reference to your mother.’

Mrs. Astley smiled as she finished speaking, and looked at her daughter; but Theodora threw herself on her knees by her mother, and sobbed upon her lap. Her heart was full of love and sorrow, mixed with joy that her mother’s longing would be soon fulfilled. She could not have told what feeling was the uppermost. Her first impulse was to tell all about the stone; but she was checked by the thought of little Edith’s disappointment if the secret were to be betrayed prematurely. But that afternoon she wrote to the stone mason, to whom she had been recommended by her ever kind helper and friend, Mr. Morgan, and ordered the inscription to be engraved exactly as her mother had written it; and then she laid her head down on the desk, and had a good cry.



## CHAPTER XLI.

Mrs. Haynes' way of 'doing no harm'—Mr. Morgan tells Theodora the worst—Gertrude contrasts herself with Theodora—Her gloomy state of mind—Theodora's parallel for argument—Gertrude sees clearly at last.



ERTRUDE did not rally from her weakness, nor did she throw off the depression of spirits from which she suffered.

'Is it true,' little Alice would ask of Mrs. Haynes, the farmer's wife,—'is it true that Gerty did kill poor little Georgey?'

'Bless you, no, child ! Whoever went and put that in your head?' answered Mrs. Haynes. 'Little Georgey tumbled in the pond, bless the little heart of him ! which I have said again and again that that there pond shouldn't ought to be left unprotected by never no hurdles or nothing. If it ain't a lesson to somebody now, which I won't mention any names, *my* name isn't Sarah Haynes.'

'But Gertie says she killed Georgey,' remarked Willy.

'Stuff and nonsense, my child ! Gerty is in the deliriums, and knows no more of what she is talking than

that milking-stool there ; and I am sure it was enough to send any one into the deliriums to see that blessed lamb pulled out of the duck-pond. There, don't talk to me no more, my dear ; it make me that low to speak of it. Go out, feed the chicken, do'ee now ; and the kind-hearted woman put her apron to her eyes, and had a little cry before she resumed her work.

'There !' soliloquized she, 'I'll just take and send Mrs. Astley a bouquet of flowers, and a dozen new-laid eggs ; it can't do no harm, any way.'

'No harm !' it is such little thoughtful kindnesses that do all the good in the world to people who are unhappy. It is a great thing to feel that others care for us. Remember you may not have many opportunities of doing great things, but we may all show sympathy, even by such little acts as this of the farmer's wife, which cost her nothing but the kind thought. If all girls would start in life with this text as a maxim, 'No man liveth to himself,' and would try in every day and every hour to in some way live to others, what a happy world this might be, with regard to sympathy and social kindness ! There never was a greater mistake in the world than for any one of us to attempt to stand alone ; and there is one great truth which we cannot learn too early, that all these little offices of kindness fall to the hands of *women* to do. Men have usually, or ought to have, the hard work of the world. I have no doubt that in Eden Adam did all the digging of the garden, and left to Eve the training of the flowers.

Gertrude dwelt always upon that one subject—that she had killed little Georgey—and she seemed to get no rest day or night from the horrible thought. She never recovered the effects of those hours of exposure to the storm and rain; her delicate constitution had received too severe a shock.

It was not many days after the funeral of little Georgey that Mr. Morgan, who was frequently now in the house, said to Theodora—

‘That child is killing herself, Theo, with self-reproach. When I think over the whole business, I feel no patience with those Clarke girls, who were the cause of all the mischief.’

‘Would it not be well to take Gertrude away from here for a time?’ asked Theodora.

‘No, my dear; it would as likely bring on the end as not.’

‘Mr. Morgan!’ exclaimed Theodora, ‘you do not really think that Gertie will die?’

‘My poor Theo, you seem destined through life to help on the most melancholy occasions. But never mind; remember it is written, “It is better to go to the house of mourning than the house of feasting.”’

‘Do you think mamma knows, Mr. Morgan?’

‘I think she guesses.’

So Theodora returned to Gertrude. Notwithstanding her sister’s opposition, she had insisted upon being with her; and, after a time, Gertrude had given in. .

‘What has Mr. Morgan been saying to you, Theo?’

asked Gertrude, directly her sister joined her. 'He has been telling you that I shall die? Ah! I know he has. I see it in your face. Now, it is of no use trying to tell stories about it. You cannot tell a story well, Theo, for you blush so. But it is no news to me, Theodora; I have guessed it all along; and I don't care—I don't care. What should I live for? To do more mischief? To break mamma's heart, as I have well-nigh done already? I don't care.'

Yet, for all that, Gertrude burst into hysterical tears.

'Gertie! Gertie dear! do not guess at what Mr. Morgan said,' answered Theodora. 'I will tell you exactly what he told me: "That child is *killing herself* by self-reproach." Now, Gertie, you have no right to kill yourself. It is your duty to try and get better. It is your duty to look at all that has taken place in its proper light, instead of exaggerating it as you do.'

'What do I know about duty?' asked Gertrude. 'I have never thought of anything but my own pleasure. Oh! Theodora, what a contrast to you! You have been a good daughter to mamma; a good sister to all of us; and I might have been like you. Theo, I am ashamed to look you in the face!'

'Oh! do not—do not talk so, Gertie,' said Theodora. 'If you only knew how we all love you.'

'I am a nice person to love,' said Gertrude. 'Now, Theodora, listen to me. Whatever you may say, I know what Mr. Morgan thinks of me; and I feel it myself. Everything is come to an end with me. I am only

sixteen, Theo, and this world and the next have come to an end with me.'

'Gertrude, do not say such dreadful things! Even if you were to die—even if you were, there is still heaven.'

'If there were, as you say, "still heaven," do you think I would mind dying?' said Gertrude. 'But there will be no heaven for me. Do you remember, Theo, no murderers shall have eternal life?'

'Gertrude, do not misquote Scripture!' exclaimed Theodora. 'It is, "No murderer hath eternal life dwelling in him." Those who crucified our Lord were murderers; yet He prayed for their forgiveness; and, of course, his prayer must have been heard. You are not a murderer; you were not so in intention.'

'I was so in reality,' said Gertrude.

'Even if you had been,' said Theodora, 'we will not discuss the question now. I do not deny that you have been very wrong. Even if you had been, Gertrude, there is the same remission for your sins as for all others.'

'I don't understand you,' said Gertrude.

'Yes, you do. You have been taught the same as I have, Gertrude; you have had the gospel preached to you.'

'And I have made a good use of it, have I not? Yes, we have been taught the same; and look at the difference between us. Look at me, Theodora, and at yourself.'

'What am I, Gertrude?' said Theodora, feeling more pained than she could tell by the comparison drawn—

‘what am I but what God has made me by his grace? What am I but through the Saviour in whom I want to persuade you to trust?’

‘There, that will do,’ said Gertrude wearily. ‘I know all that you can tell me. I have learnt all this from my youth up; and now, at the age of sixteen, I am going to die, and the gates of heaven are shut against me.’

Theodora knew not what to say further. Gertrude was obstinate in her self-condemnation, as she had been through life in everything else. There was but one resource left, to pray for her; and Theodora sought the only comfort left.

Day after day Gertrude became weaker, until her life became shortened into weeks, and then to days.

One day she startled every one by suddenly exclaiming—

‘How can I meet him? How can I look little Georgey in the face in heaven, when I refused his last request? Oh! my little brother, if you only could know how sorry I am!’

‘He would forgive you as soon as he knows, Gertie,’ said Theodora. ‘Did not mamma forgive you when you were sorry?’

‘Yes; but she is so good, and she loves me,’ said Gertrude.

‘Gertie,’ said Theodora, ‘do you think God is less good than she is? Do you think Christ loves you less than your mother?’

Gertrude burst into tears, and cried for a long time, and Theodora did not interrupt her.

*Gertrude Sees clearly at Last.*      333

‘I see it now,’ said she softly, when she had exhausted her tears. ‘I see it now, Theo. Oh Theo! how I love you!’

Then Theodora, in a low voice, read the parable of the Prodigal Son; and, almost before she had finished reading, Gertrude had fallen asleep.





## CHAPTER XLII.

The last sad day—Unexpected arrival—Mrs. Toogood's generous proposal—Theodora resolves to remain with her mother—Mrs. Toogood deserves her name—Alfred opens a letter, and gives strange news—Theodora's fondest dream is realized—She has been 'God's gift' to her mother.

**T**HERE was another sad day at Chatterton—the day that Gertrude was buried—and then Theodora began to cast in her own mind what she was called upon to do. It was hard that Mrs. Astley should be left with no older companion than Edith so soon after her bereavement, and Theodora sat down to write to Mrs. Toogood to ask for an extension of leave.

The letter was just finished, and Theodora had asked Alfred, who had come down to his sister's funeral, to take it to the post, when Edith exclaimed—

‘Wait a minute, Alf; there is some one coming in at the gate. Such a funny, stiff old lady! And, oh! Theo, she has such a big bonnet with a long veil! Oh! Theo, let me get away somewhere and hide, for I don't like her; she is such an old frump! ’

‘For shame, Edie! don't be so absurd,’ said Theodora,

looking from the window ; then, immediately afterwards, she called out—

‘Why, it is Mrs. Toogood, I declare !’ and she ran from the room and down the path to meet her.

‘Why, I thought Mrs. Toogood was nice,’ said Edith, in a tone of disappointment.

‘Does she look so very nasty, then, little lady ?’ asked Mrs. Toogood, entering the room.

Edith did not know what to do. She stood, blushing redder every moment, until Mrs. Toogood laughed, and said—

‘Well, my dear, I don’t wonder at your being frightened at my ugly brown face ; but your sister Theodora will tell you that I am not quite so bad as I look. Now, Theodora, introduce me to your mother.’

Mrs. Astley presently mentioned the subject of Theodora’s unposted letter.

‘That is the very thing I came about, madam,’ said Mrs. Toogood. ‘After hearing from your daughter of what had taken place in the family, I was surprised that she did not make some such request. It would not be fair to take her from you so soon again ; but some fresh arrangement might be made. I am not fond of praising girls to their faces, Mrs. Astley, but your daughter has been more than I can tell you to me.’

‘Oh, Mrs. Toogood !’ said Theodora.

‘My dear, never interrupt,’ rejoined the old lady. ‘You have two younger daughters, Mrs. Astley. If you could persuade yourself to leave Chatterton, they should remain

with me, receiving every care and instruction, for their sister Theodora's sake. On those terms only, Mrs. Astley—for their sister's sake.'

'But we couldn't leave Chatterton,' said Edith.

'And for yourself, my dear madam,' continued Mrs. Toogood, still to Mrs. Astley, without noticing the interruption, 'if you will consent to such an arrangement, I think we could keep house together. I am an old woman now, and unequal to the duties of housekeeping single-handed. Pecuniary arrangements we will leave until some future time.'

'You are very, very kind,' said Mrs. Astley; 'and I think it would be wrong and selfish in me to say no to so generous a proposal. I can assure you, the education of my children has been a constant source of anxiety to me since the death of my husband. But, if you will allow me a little time—'

'What is the good of that, Mrs. Astley?'

'Why, you see,' observed Edith again, 'we could not leave Chatterton.'

'My good little girl, when I was your age, I was taught to speak when I was spoken to,' said Mrs. Toogood; whereupon Edith returned to her former opinion of Mrs. Toogood, that she was anything but 'nice.'

'Edith has been so much my companion of late, poor child, that I am afraid she has been brought too forward,' said Mrs. Astley.

'Here's a letter! here's the post-woman!' exclaimed Willie, rushing to the door.

‘Mamma, you will not leave home, will you?’ whispered Edith, not to be put down, although subdued. ‘You will not leave the grave—with papa, and Georgey, and Gertie?’

‘Oh, my child! my child! I hardly know what to do,’ sobbed Mrs. Astley. ‘It will be very hard to leave home, and very hard to leave the graves of my darlings! But it is for your good, and for Theodora. I cannot part with Theodora again—I cannot give up my greatest earthly comfort!’ By this time Theodora’s arms were round her mother. ‘Forgive me, Mrs. Toogood,’ said Mrs. Astley. ‘Do not think me very weak; but my husband is gone, and my baby, and my Gertrude, and their graves are all in this world that I have left of them!’

‘I will stay with you here, mother,’ whispered Theodora. ‘You shall not leave home, and you shall not part with me. We will not part any more until God parts us. I shall find some employment, never fear. God will put me in the way of it.’

Mrs. Toogood walked to the window, and looked out.

‘We have not offended you, our kind, good friend, I trust,’ said Mrs. Astley, after an interval, seeing that the schoolmistress still looked out of the window.

Mrs. Toogood turned round, walked to Theodora, and kissed her.

‘I don’t know what I am to do without you at Prospect House,’ said she; ‘but you are a good, dutiful girl, and the blessing of God will go with you.’

It was not until the middle of tea-time, Mrs. Toogood being still with them, that Alfred exclaimed—

‘I declare if we haven’t all of us forgotten the letter !’

‘Open it, Alf,’ said his mother.

Mrs. Toogood stared ; she could not help it ; it was so strange to her to hear a boy desired to open his mother’s letter.

‘It is some business abomination,’ commenced Alfred. ‘Why, I do believe it is from a lawyer ! Hullo ! mother, what do you think ?’ said Alfred, becoming very red.

‘What, my son ?’

Alfred ran to his mother and hugged her.

‘Your old Uncle John, whom you have never seen, mother, is dead. He’s dead ! isn’t that jolly ?’

‘My dearest Alfred,’ said Mrs. Astley, ‘how can you say anything so shocking ?’

‘Well, mother dear, you can’t pretend to be fond of him, considering you never saw him in your life.’

‘But, Alfred, what could there be in the death of any one to deserve such a word as “jolly?”’

‘Oh, dear me, mother,’ said Alfred, ‘I forgot the principal part of the letter. Of course I must have appeared an unfeeling brute. I didn’t mean that Uncle John’s death is jolly, but that he has left you no end of money. Why, mother dear ! why, mamma, what makes you look so strange ? Are not you glad ? are not you pleased ? You won’t be obliged to screw and to save any more, you dear old mother. I am so glad, that I could jump over the top of the house !’

But Mrs. Astley did not show any such exuberant joy.

She could only thank God in her heart for his goodness, and bless her children for their affection.

'I need not part now with my Theo,' were the first words she said; 'and she need not work her poor little hands and head for me.'

'I like to work for you, mother,' said Theodora. 'It has been my greatest pleasure.'

While they were still talking of the past and the future, Edith had been peeping in at the door several times. At length her impatience could bear no longer delay, and she came into the room, and stood near to Theodora.

'Theo, it is come, and they are putting it up,' she whispered. 'Is it not odd?—this very day; but I suppose Gertie's name can be added.'

'Hush! hush!' said Theodora.

But her mother asked what had taken place.

'If you would not mind coming to the grave, mamma,' said Edith. 'If it would not pain you to go again so soon.'

'No, Edith, no,' said Theodora.

But Edith was pertinacious.

'If you would not mind, mamma.'

Mrs. Astley rose at once to go; she imagined there must be some difficulty which required her presence. It was but a few steps to the churchyard, and the whole party accompanied her. As soon as they reached the spot, Mrs. Astley saw what was taking place. Several workmen were employed at the newly-opened grave. A

plain white stone cross stood at the head, and as she came near to it she read the inscription which she herself had written.

She turned to Alfred. 'Is this your doing, my son?' she asked.

'No,' cried Edith, with a crimson face; 'it is no one's doing but Theo's. It is all Theo's work, excepting sevenpence; and I gave sevenpence. Everything is Theo's doing; she always thinks of everything.'

Theodora had thought this moment would have been one of unmixed pleasure; and yet now her tears were dropping fast.

'My own dear child!' said Mrs. Astley, taking her in her arms, 'you were rightly named. You have been my greatest earthly comfort. You have been God's gift to me, Theodora.'

And Theodora remembered her father's dying words, and thanked God that they had been fulfilled.



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